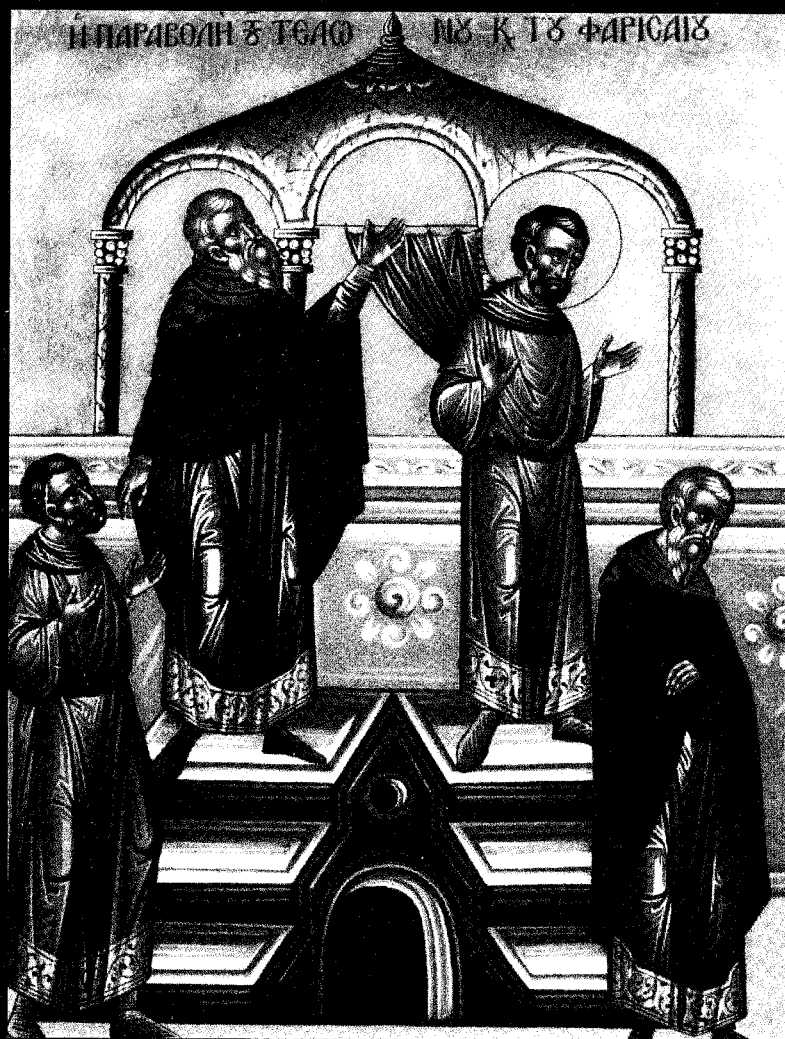


PRAYER OF THE PUBLICAN



Justification in the Desert Fathers

JOSEPH LUCAS

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Joseph Lucas



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Pentru Irina și copiii mei

For Irina and my children

Ταῖς ἐξ ἔργων καυχήσεσι Φαρι-
σαῖον δικαιοῦντα ἑαυτὸν κατέκρι-
νας, Κύριε· καὶ Τελώνην μετριοπα-
θήσαντα καὶ στεναγμοῖς ἱλασμόν αἰ-
τούμενον ἐδικαίωσας· οὐ γὰρ προσί-
εσαι τοὺς μεγαλόφρονας λογισμοὺς
καὶ τὰς συντετριμμένας καρδίας οὐκ
ἐξουθενεῖς· διὸ καὶ ἡμεῖς σοὶ
προσπίπτομεν ἐν ταπεινώσει, τῷ
παθόντι δι' ἡμᾶς· Παράσχου τὴν
ἄφεσιν καὶ τὸ μέγα ἔλεος.

The Pharisee, who vindicated himself
by boasting about his works, O Lord,
You condemned; but You vindicated the
Publican who was modest, and who
with sighs prayed for expiation. For
You do not accept boastful thoughts, but
Hearts that are contrite You do not despise.
Therefore we, too, in humility fall
down before You, who suffered for us.
Grant us absolution and great mercy.

*Doxastikon of the Canon (plagal of mode four)
Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee*

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Abbreviations	v
Introduction	vii
<i>The Desert Fathers.....</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Δικαιοσύνη in Early Christianity.....</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>The Publican and the Pharisee.....</i>	<i>xvi</i>
Chapter One: Judgment	1
<i>The Day of the Lord.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Fear of God</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Prerogative of Judgment</i>	<i>23</i>
Chapter Two: Humility	35
<i>Humility and Self-Condemnation</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Voluntary Descent</i>	<i>42</i>
Chapter Three: Righteousness	55
<i>Righteousness of God.....</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>Justification of Man</i>	<i>63</i>
Conclusion.....	73
Appendix	77
<i>Reception of the Desert Fathers.....</i>	<i>77</i>

<i>Epilogue</i>	88
Select Bibliography	89

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Abbreviations

- ACC *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Edited by Thomas C. Oden. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.
- ANF *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by A. Cleveland Coxe. Reprint. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- BDAG *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Edited by Frederick William Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- KJV King James Version
- Lampe *Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Edited by G.W.H. Lampe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- LXX *Septuagint with Apocrypha*. Edited by Sir Lancelot Brenton. Reprint. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.
- NPNF *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Reprint. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- PG *Patrologia Graeca*. Edited by J. P. Migne. Paris, 1857-1866.

- Ward Benedicta Ward. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection.*

Introduction

SINCE THE DAWN OF THE REFORMATION, Christians have debated the meaning and significance of justification (*δικαιοσύνη*) in the Scriptures. Dialogues in recent times between Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church have often turned to this topic, with some level of consensus being reached.¹ Perhaps this is because justification has remained an important aspect of western theology since the Middle Ages. In Alister McGrath's seminal study *Iustitia Dei*, he outlines the development of a specific doctrine of justification in the west, beginning with Augustine. He concludes that this doctrine is part of the common heritage of western Christendom.² The conflict during the Reformation was never about whether justification should be considered an integral aspect of Christian theology, but rather how

¹ See, e.g., Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

² Alister McGrath. *Iustitia Dei* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), *passim*. See bibliography for other studies on justification in western Christianity.

this doctrine should be understood. McGrath states: "[T]he Reformation demonstrates both continuity and discontinuity with [medieval Catholicism.] Chief among these discontinuities is the new understanding of the nature of justification."³ Generally speaking, for the Protestants, justification was depicted in terms of God's forensic declaration that a sinner is righteous, not on account of any action of his own, but through faith in Jesus Christ.⁴ The Tridentine definition of justification, formulated at the Council of Trent in reaction to the Reformers, emphasizes the role of works in appropriating justification for oneself. Though these two systems of justification differ, they emerged from a common theological inheritance and share a common theological vision.

The same may not be said concerning the history of justification in the eastern churches. A specific doctrine of justification, as understood by Roman Catholics and Protestants, is notably absent from the theology of the Orthodox Church, which for the most part was not subject to the myriad theological conflicts that led to the formulation of this doctrine in the west.⁵ The question for the contemporary Ortho-

³ McGrath, 187.

⁴ Ibid., 182.

⁵ The notable exception is the case of Patriarch Cyril Loukaris (d. 1638), who was heavily influenced by the burgeoning Protestant movement he encountered in Europe. See George Hadjiantoniou, *Protestant Patriarch: The Life of Cyril Lucaris* (Richmond: Epworth Press, 1961).

dox Church is not so much what a doctrine of justification looks like, but rather why such a doctrine was never formulated. As inheritors of the Greek patristic tradition, the Orthodox Church was not fixated upon the writings of Augustine; nor did the Roman legal system figure prominently in the theological inspiration of the east.⁶ Even so, the language of justification is found throughout the Septuagint and New Testament. With the biblical emphasis on justice and righteousness, why did the Greek Fathers never develop such a teaching? This query provides the impetus for our present study: what does the Greek patristic tradition say about *δικαιοσύνη*, and what interpretation was given for those portions of the Scriptures where it is mentioned? We shall explore this subject by focusing narrowly on one particular genre of patristic writings — *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Within this corpus, we shall concentrate on the *Alphabetical Collection*, striving to understand how the Desert Fathers understood *δικαιοσύνη*.

THE DESERT FATHERS. The history of the received text of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* is complicated and uncertain. The monks whose sayings (or *apophthegmata*) are contained therein flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries. The largest number of sayings originates from the areas of Scetis

⁶ McGrath, 4.

and Nitria, located south of Alexandria in Egypt, with some sayings coming from regions farther down the Nile.⁷ It was there in the inhospitable conditions of the desert where men and women from diverse cultures and languages — Copts, Palestinians, Greeks, Romans and others — settled in caves or huts, cutting themselves off from the secular world to focus their attention on the attainment of salvation. Some chose to live as hermits, like Anthony the Great; while others settled around a wise elder — a spiritual father (“abba”) or mother (“amma”) — oftentimes working and praying together as a community (known as a “skete,” and later “coenobium”).⁸ Monks who labored diligently in the spiritual life oftentimes became elders themselves, esteemed for their sagacity. Many of their sayings, or *apophthegmata*, are preserved in the *Alphabetical Collection*.

With the devastation of Scetis in 407/8, the process of compiling the sayings of the fathers likely began.⁹ “Physical insecurity and a sense of moral decay gave impetus to the work, with the fear lest the great Old Men and their times be forgotten,” writes Chit-

⁷ Ward, xviii.

⁸ The skete generally consisted of several monks living as hermits in close proximity, gathering at various times, whereas the coenobium (often accredited to Abba Pachomius) consisted of monks living together in a community focused upon commonality and cooperation.

⁹ Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1966), 67.

ty.¹⁰ Interestingly, *apophthegmata* associated with Abba Poemen account for one-seventh of the *Sayings*, suggesting that his disciples may be responsible for initiating the process of collation.¹¹ However, scholarly consensus points to Palestine as the location where the final text was edited, a process completed by the end of the fifth century.¹² Supporting this hypothesis is the presence of numerous sayings from monks settled in Palestine, as well as bishops well-known in that region (such as Basil the Great and Epiphanius of Cyprus). As the Egyptian desert became increasingly hostile and the monks became increasingly vulnerable to attacks from bandits and warring tribes, many monks fled to Palestine to resume their ascetic life in a more suitable environment. Fear of losing the oral and written traditions they carried with them became the catalyst for compiling the *Sayings*.¹³ Although many of the sayings may have first been heard in the Coptic tongue, the earliest edition of the *Alphabetical Collection* was written in Greek. Over a few centuries, translations appeared in Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic and Ethiopian, attesting to the popularity of the *Sayings*.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 86–7.

¹³ Ibid., 88.

¹⁴ Ibid., 86.

The first critical edition of the *Sayings* in Greek (with parallel Latin) was produced by J.B. Coelier in 1677.¹⁵ This was later included in J.P. Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, and remains the primary text for the *Alphabetical Collection* today. Jean-Claude Guy published a supplemental study with missing sayings in 1962, as well as a translation of the *Alphabetical Collection* into French. After completing his critical edition of the *Systematic Collection*, Guy began work on a complete critical edition of the *Alphabetical Collection*, but did not complete this work before his death. Other scholars, including Lucien Regnault and Luciana Mortari, have contributed to research on the manuscripts in recent times. For the present study, we will be working mostly with Benedicta Ward's English translation, with revisions based on the PG text. In a few instances where Ward's translation does not convey our emphasis, I will provide my own translation.

The study of the *Alphabetical Collection* may be approached from two angles, which I propose are complimentary, and must balance one another in order to gain a proper understanding of the text. On the one hand, the *Sayings* reflect a diverse group of personalities from many backgrounds, representing different theological approaches. On the other hand, the collection as a whole — presumably compiled and

¹⁵ Ibid., 85.

redacted by one group — was received as one, integral text by later readers. Thus, we must analyze the text from both perspectives. When clarification of a specific saying is necessary, we will compare other sayings by that same elder (or perhaps a disciple). This is in keeping with the original context of the sayings. At the same time, we will flesh out themes in purview of the entire text, much in the same way early readers would have done. This methodology likewise takes into account a certain homogeneity detectable in the text, perhaps the result of the collection's editors who would have chosen those sayings that reflected their theological tendencies, and altered or omitted any sayings that did not.

ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY. Our purpose is to discover how the Desert Fathers understood *δικαιοσύνη* (and the related verb *δικαίω*). In many cases, we will not translate the various *δικ*- cognates, leaving it to the reader to infer the meaning. However, some philological suppositions must be stated in advance. It is typical for scholars to distinguish between two supposedly incompatible definitions of *δικαιοσύνη* in Late Antiquity. When the context is determined to be juridical, *δικαιοσύνη* is defined in terms of legal standing, especially before a judge. Translated as “justice” or “justification” in such instances, it conveys a sense of equity and retribution. Our English word “justice” comes from

the Latin *iustitia* (used for *δικαιοσύνη* in the Vulgate translation), a word inseverably connected to the Roman legal system. In addition, “justification” is laden with later Roman Catholic and Protestant connotations, due to its prominence in the polemic between these factions. In another context, especially when *δικαιοσύνη* is used as a personal attribute, it is defined in terms of ethical or behavioral standards, of fulfilling what is socially or morally expected of one. In such cases, *δικαιοσύνη* is translated as “righteousness,” an English word with Germanic roots, meaning “straight” or “correct.”¹⁶ But which set of English root words — “just-” or “right-” — best reflect the meaning of the *δικ-* cognates?

For the Desert Fathers, *δικαιοσύνη* is a thoroughly a biblical concept. In the Septuagint, *δικαιοσύνη* translates the Hebrew *tsedeq*, which conveys a sense of fairness and uprightness, and is especially attributed to God, who is described as perfectly righteous.¹⁷ Like its Hebrew counterpart, *δικαιοσύνη* generically refers to what is right or fair.¹⁸ In Greco-Roman culture, *δικαιοσύνη* was associated with public expectations and obligations, of fulfilling what is expected of

¹⁶ *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966), 767–8.

¹⁷ *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 586.

¹⁸ *BDAG*, 246.

one in society. It is probably for this reason that the Septuagint translators chose *δικαιοσύνη* to reflect the covenant relationship between God and his people. God is *δίκαιος* in that he always maintains his end of the agreement, fulfilling his covenant promises. Likewise, the servant of God is *δίκαιος* if he fulfills what is expected of him by God.¹⁹

The verb *δικαιόω* is more difficult to define. In the western tradition, *δικαιόω* came to mean “to justify,” or even “to acquit,” conceptualized strictly in juridical terms. According to Lampe, *δικαιόω* can mean “to set aright,” and “to deem to be in the right”;²⁰ while *BDAG* adds “to render a favorable verdict,” and “to take up a legal cause.”²¹ Perhaps the most inclusive definition for *δικαιόω*, cited in both lexicons, is “to vindicate,” which conveys both the juridical and corrective (ethical) aspects of the verb. This definition also jibes with the general Septuagint usage of *δικαιόω* in relation to Israel’s covenant. When God fulfills his promises to his people, he is said to vindicate himself against his accusers;²² and when the Israelites remain faithful to God, they are likewise vindicated against their enemies.²³ This concept is also linked in the prophetic books with the final

¹⁹ *Genesis* 18:19.

²⁰ 370–1.

²¹ 249.

²² *Psalms* 50:4; *Ezekiel* 36:23.

²³ *Psalms* 34:24, 42:1, 134:14; *Exodus* 23:7.

judgment, where God promises to vindicate his faithful servants.²⁴ We will delve into the relation between judgment and *δικαίω* in Chapter One.

A sharp distinction between juridical and ethical meanings for all the *δικ-* cognates is unnecessary. In fact, it may be contended that such a clear demarcation in early Christian thought is impossible to make. We shall show precisely this through the course of this study, taking the *Alphabetical Collection* as a representative sample of how Greek-speaking Christians in Late Antiquity may have understood *δικαιοσύνη*. In the end, we shall see that Desert Fathers understood both the juridical and ethical aspects of *δικαιοσύνη*, without the accentuation or exaggeration of one over the other.

THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE. Where our examination of the Desert Fathers unites with our theme of *δικαιοσύνη* is in the realm of patristic exegesis. There have been many valuable studies on the biblical hermeneutics of the Greek Fathers, the most complete being Charles Kannengiesser's *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*.²⁵ The Desert Fathers em-

²⁴ *Isaiah* 45:25.

²⁵ (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2006). See also Christopher Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998); John O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2005); and Karl-fried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*

ployed many of the same techniques of interpretation as their secular contemporaries: typology, allegory, symbolism, etc. And yet, in reading the *apophthegmata*, one is struck by the Desert Fathers' practical application of the Scriptures. Burton-Christie writes, "Biblical interpretation [in the Desert Fathers] is always encountered as part of a lifelike situation, appearing sometimes as the focus of a particular saying or narrative, other times as the backdrop."²⁶ The Desert Fathers did not analyze the Scriptures theoretically, but rather in the context of applying them to their daily spiritual walk. Therefore, we will not find elaborate exegesis of whole pericopae, but rather short quotes and subtle allusions to the Bible. To understand how the Desert Fathers use these references, we will need to carefully examine their *apophthegmata* for clues.

A question that arises in the study of the Desert Fathers is their familiarity with the Scriptures. The purchase or copying of manuscripts was extremely expensive in ancient times, and very few would have had access to their own copy of the Bible. In addition, many of the rustic monks who fled to the Egyptian desert were illiterate, prompting some scholars to assume more pagan influence on early monasticism than biblical inspiration. It is certainly true that in this nascent stage of monasticism, the monks did not

(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

²⁶ Burton-Christie, 61.

gather for formal tutoring in reading and writing. However, the *Sayings* themselves bear witness to the fact that the monks were very knowledgeable of the Scriptures. There are several reasons for this. First, the *Sayings* (as well as biographical accounts, such as the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*) rarely mention conversion to Christianity occurring simultaneously with the profession of monasticism. The majority of those who took up their abode in the wilderness were already Christians, and therefore would have heard the Scriptures read and interpreted in church while still residing in the world. Second, the *Sayings* reveal that many monks were indeed literate, and that groups of monks would gather to read and reflect upon the Scriptures in daily *synaxes*,²⁷ assuming at least one in their company could read. And third, in the more organized monastic communities of sketes and coenobia, the monks constructed temples for the observance of liturgical services. Monastic priests and deacons, as a rule, were literate (though there may have been exceptions). In the monastic church, the monks would hear the Scriptures read and explicated just as they had in the world. For these three reasons, we can say that many, if not all, of the Desert Fathers were regularly exposed to the Scriptures; hence, any argument that

²⁷ This is not to be confused with the gathering for a liturgical service—especially on Saturdays, Sundays and feast days—which is also referred to in early monastic and Christian literature as a *synaxis*.

their beliefs and practices were primarily influenced by paganism is unsubstantiated. Their lifestyle and worldview were inspired by the Bible, which provided the impetus for the monastic life.

The biblical books most often quoted in the *Sayings* (in order) are the Pauline epistles (*in toto*), *Matthew*, *Luke* and *Psalms*.²⁸ Concerning the Psalter, there is ample evidence in the *Sayings* themselves that monks had begun utilizing this text as a prayer book, reading or chanting psalms at various times during the day. Hearing or praying *Psalms* regularly, with its many references to *δικαιοσύνη*, would have made an impact on the way the Desert Fathers interpreted this same theme in the New Testament. This is especially important in understanding how they used Paul in contrast to the gospels. In contemporary biblical scholarship, *δικαιοσύνη* is generally relegated to Pauline studies due to the apostle's concentration on this theme, especially in *Romans* and *Galatians*. But as we will investigate, the Desert Fathers quote Paul only once in reference to *δικαιοσύνη*. However, the gospel usages of *δικαιοσύνη*, which reflect the basic premises of the Old Testament (particularly *Psalms*), are fairly common in the *Sayings*. One particular passage will provide us with our own hermeneutical key for gaining an understanding of the *Sayings* — the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. In four instances in

²⁸ Burton-Christie, 302.

the *Sayings*, the parable is directly referenced; but the parable's implications are found throughout the text. The parable reads:

And [Jesus] spake this parable unto certain men which trusted in themselves that they were righteous (*δίκαιοι*), and despised others: "Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified (*δεδικαιωμένος*) rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased (*ταπεινωθήσεται*); and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted (*ὕψωθήσεται*)."²⁹

The dynamic established by the parable is that humbling oneself leads to God's vindication. As we shall see, the Desert Fathers work this equation out in various ways, but always coming to the same conclusion.

²⁹ Luke 18:9-14.

One of the earliest patristic interpretations on the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee also connects it with a formula of *δικαιοσύνη*. In a fragment of a homily on the parable of the Prodigal Son, Clement the Alexandrian provides an explanation of *δικαιοσύνη*. Regarding the Prodigal Son's admission to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and earth," Clement comments: "[B]oth his humility (*ταπεινοφροσύνη*) and his self-accusation (*ἐαυτοῦ κατηγορία*) became the cause of justification (*δικαιώσεως*) and glory (*δόξης αἰτία*). For the righteous man (*δίκαιος*) accuses himself in his first words. So also the Publican departed justified (*δεδικαιωμένος*) rather than the Pharisee."³⁰ This short passage is remarkable in that it echoes the sentiments of the Desert Fathers exactly. Though it is beyond the scope of the present study, it may even be possible to find a connection between this text and the *Sayings*, especially since Clement was revered by many Christians in Egypt.

As we begin our investigation of *δικαιοσύνη* in the Desert Fathers, we posit an initial saying, attributed to Abba Ammonas. In response to a monk who asks Ammonas which of three ascetical practices will lead to salvation, he says, "It is not right for you to do any of these three things. Rather, sit in your cell and eat a little every day, and keep the word of the Publican always in your heart, and you shall be able to

³⁰ ANF 2.583 (revised); PG 9.764.

be saved.”³¹ As we unpack the primary themes of our study — judgment, humility and righteousness — we will begin to understand the meaning of this *apophthegma*, and its relation to *δικαιοσύνη*.

³¹ Ward, 26 (revised); PG 65.120.

CHAPTER ONE

Judgment

THE STARTING POINT FOR OUR INVESTIGATION into the meaning of δικαιοσύνη in the Desert Fathers is the theme of judgment (κρίσις), which figures prominently in the *Alphabetical Collection*. During the course of this chapter, we will explore the eschatological views contained in the *apophthegmata*, establishing the presuppositions underlying the Desert Fathers' exegesis. First, we will examine Christian traditions concerning the *eschaton* and judgment, up to the fourth and fifth centuries, thus providing a context for the traditions contained in the *Sayings*. Second, we will analyze the sayings themselves to determine the eschatological views preserved within the text. Along the way, the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee will be our guide, providing a gateway to understanding the mind of the Desert Fathers. A saying of Epiphanius of Cyprus crystallizes our theme: "The Canaanite woman cries out (βοᾷ) and is heard; and the woman with the issue of blood is silent and blessed; but the Pharisee cries out (κράζει) and he is condemned (κατακρίνεται);

the publican does not open his mouth and is heard.”¹ There are multiple levels of meaning in this beautiful, poetic saying which will come into focus by the end of this chapter.

THE DAY OF THE LORD. The Desert Fathers, as heirs to the tradition of the Church, received the Septuagint and New Testament as divinely-inspired (θεόστομος) documents which reflect a unified vision of God and his proclamation of salvation. That Jesus Christ, as Risen Lord, will judge all mankind belongs to the earliest *kerygma* of the Church preserved in the Scriptures. Preaching to Cornelius and his household concerning Christ, Peter declared, “[H]e commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead.”² For a devout Gentile God-fearer like Cornelius, no less than for his Jewish contemporaries, this must have been a startling claim. The Jews’ beloved psalms declare in no uncertain terms that “God is judge!” (Θεός κριτής ἐστι).³ In *John*, Jesus begins to unveil this mystery for his apostles: “[T]he Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.”⁴ And after the resurrection

¹ Ward, 57–8 (revised); PG 65.165.

² Acts 10:42.

³ Psalms 49:6.

⁴ John 5:22: οὐδὲ γὰρ ὁ πατὴρ κρίνει οὐδένα, ἀλλὰ τὴν κρίσιν πᾶσαν δέδωκεν τῷ υἱῷ.

Christ again asserts his unique status, declaring, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”⁵

For the apostles, these claims were confirmed by a single event — the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul, who came face to face with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, offered his personal witness to the philosophers of the Areopagus: “[T]he times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent, because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”⁶ Though not endorsed by all Jews (such as the Sadducees), the belief in a bodily resurrection of the dead had gained currency in Jewish thought during the Second Temple period.⁷ *Ezekiel*, which portrays a valley of skeletons awakening and being reconsti-

⁵ *Matthew* 28:18.

⁶ *Acts* 17:30–1: τοὺς μὲν οὖν χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας ὑπεριδὼν ὁ θεὸς τὰ νῦν παραγγέλλει τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντας πανταχοῦ μετανοεῖν, καθότι ἔστησεν ἡμέραν ἐν ἣ μέλλει κρίνειν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ ἐν ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὥρισεν, πίστιν παρασχὼν πᾶσιν ἀναστήσας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν.

⁷ See Jon Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006), *passim*; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 85–206; cf. George Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity*, Expanded ed. (Harvard: Harvard Divinity, 2007), *passim*.

tuted at the decree of God,⁸ and *Daniel*, which describes a universal resurrection (the righteous unto life and the unrighteous unto condemnation),⁹ both figured prominently in popular Jewish thought. Pious Jews looked forward to the "Day of the Lord,"¹⁰ where the resurrection and judgment of all mankind were integral of one divine act. On that day, the righteous (οἱ δίκαιοι) would be vindicated (δικαιόω) by God, and those condemned (κατάκριτος/κατάδικος) would be justly punished.

According to Christian doctrine, in rising from the dead before the appointed time of judgment, Jesus Christ was revealed to his disciples as the "Righteous One,"¹¹ designated by God the Father to judge all mankind. This turned Pharisaical wisdom on its head. Whereas before the paschal experience of the apostles, many Jews awaited the establishment of an earthly kingdom where the righteous would reign over the nations, with the resurrection of Christ, the Church resolutely focused upon his coming again in glory, and with him the descent of the "Heavenly Jerusalem."¹² This early Christian understanding of final judgment would be summed up in early baptismal formulae

⁸ *Ezekiel* 37:1–14.

⁹ *Daniel* 12:1–3.

¹⁰ See *Ezekiel* 30:3; *Joel* 2:11; *Amos* 5:18–20; *Obadiah* 1:15; *Zephaniah* 1:14; and *Malachi* 4:5.

¹¹ *Acts* 3:14, 7:52.

¹² *Hebrews* 12:22; *Revelation* 3:12, 21:2, 21:9–10.

such as those found in the writings of Polycarp,¹³ Justin Martyr¹⁴ and Hippolytus.¹⁵ Irenaeus of Lyon, writing in the late second century, is representative of this early Christian eschatological doctrine:

[We believe in] the second coming from the heavens in the glory of the Father to recapitulate all things and to raise up all flesh of all humanity, so that... he may make a righteous judgment among all men, sending into everlasting fire the spiritual powers of evil and the angels who transgressed and fell into rebellion, and the impious... among men, but upon the righteous... bestowing life and immortality and securing to them everlasting glory.¹⁶

Perhaps the earliest references to the judgment of Christ in literature from Egypt may be found in the writings of Clement the Alexandrian.¹⁷ Evidence that Christians in Egypt adhered to a formulaic creedal statement—likely incorporating a clause affirming the role of Christ as judge of mankind—begins with Origen in the third century, and Alexander of

¹³ *To the Philippians* 2:1: ὃς ἔρχεται κριτὴς ζώντων καὶ νεκρῶν, οὗ τὸ αἶμα ἐκζητήσει ὁ θεὸς ἀπὸ τῶν ἀπειθούντων αὐτῶ.

¹⁴ *Dialogue with Trypho* 132.1.

¹⁵ *Apostolic Tradition* 21.15.

¹⁶ *Against Heresies* 1.10.1; PG 7.549.

¹⁷ *Christ the Educator*, trans. Simon Wood (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954), 61, 64, 78.

Alexandria in the early fourth.¹⁸ The creed of Abba Macarius, preserved in the *Apophthegmata Macarii* and likely based on the earlier prototype, avers that Christ who "sits on the right hand of the Father. . . will come again in the coming age to judge the living and the dead."¹⁹ But this creed and other local variations would eventually be displaced by the formula of Nicaea, promulgated in 325 and championed by Athanasius of Alexandria, disciple of the father of the Desert Fathers, Anthony the Great. Here we read the simple declaration that Christ "will come again [in glory] to judge the living and the dead."²⁰ With the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the apostolic tradition proclaiming the adjudicative authority of Christ is again affirmed, and in time this creed becomes the standard baptismal confession throughout the Christian East.

This was the milieu in which the monastic movement in Egypt began and flourished. The Desert Fathers, deeply immersed in the biblical and patristic tradition before them, without a doubt recognized Christ as judge of all mankind.²¹ Throughout the *apo-*

¹⁸ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, Reprint (London: Continuum, 2006), 188–9.

¹⁹ Ibid., 191.

²⁰ Ibid., 216. The phrase "in glory" was added at the synod in Constantinople in 381.

²¹ Burton-Christie alleges some influence here from Egyptian paganism, particularly the judgment of souls by Osiris, but evidence of this is insubstantial. See *Word in the Desert*, 181–2.

phthegmata, final judgment remains a basic, underlying presupposition. Abba Anthony tells his disciples, "Remember what you have promised God, for it will be required of you on the Day of Judgment (*ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως*)."²² Abba Orsisius candidly cautions, "With difficulty shall we be able to escape the judgment of God (*τὴν κρίσιν τοῦ Θεοῦ*)."²³ As in other early patristic literature, the "dreadful judgment seat" is used by synecdoche for a grander vision of universal resurrection and judgment. Abba Arsenius, warning his disciples not to allow anyone outside of the coenobium to bury him after his death, says, "If you ever give my remains to anyone, we will be judged before the dreadful seat of judgment (*τοῦ βήματος τοῦ φοβεροῦ*)."²⁴ Abba Agathon, as he lay dying, was asked by his disciples, "Where are you?" He responded, "I am standing before the judgment seat of God (*τοῦ κριτηρίου τοῦ Θεοῦ*)."²⁵ The image depicted in all of these sayings is the same: Christ the Victor, sitting on his throne in judgment.

For some of the Desert Fathers, as seen in the above saying of Agathon, the final judgment of the soul is seen as occurring immediately after death rather than at the consummation of time. This re-

²² Ward, 8; PG 65.85.

²³ Ward, 161 (revised); PG 65.316.

²⁴ Ward, 18; PG 65.105.

²⁵ Ward, 24–5; PG 65.117. *κριτηρίου* conjures up the image of a tribunal. See Lampe, 779.

flects the “inaugurated eschatology” of the New Testament: the end is dramatically ushered into the present in and through Christ.²⁶ In *Hebrews* we read, “[I]t is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment”²⁷ — but the epistle does not designate when this judgment will occur. Just as Stephen, before his martyrdom at the hands of an angry mob, saw Christ in the heavens standing ready to judge,²⁸ so does Abba Agathon receive a proleptic vision of his own examination before Christ. However, this does not contradict the general opinion in the *apophthegmata* that judgment shall occur at the second coming. Christ is ever “he who is coming.”²⁹ As *James* forebodes, “Behold, the Judge is standing at the door.”³⁰

Theophilus, Archbishop of Alexandria, likewise elaborates on the theme of personal judgment. By analogy, the judgment is likened to a legal trial, though cosmic in proportion. The Archbishop describes the scene in vivid detail:

²⁶ The term “inaugurated eschatology” was first introduced by Georges Florovsky in “Revelation and Interpretation,” in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 1 (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1987), 36. Florovsky preferred this term over that coined by C. H. Dodd: “realized eschatology.”

²⁷ *Hebrews* 9:27: καὶ καθ’ ὅσον ἀπόκειται τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἅπαξ ἀποθανεῖν, μετὰ δὲ τοῦτο κρίσις.

²⁸ *Acts* 7:54.

²⁹ ὁ ἐρχόμενος. See *Habakkuk* 2:3; *Hebrews* 10:37.

³⁰ *James* 5:9.

[T]he force and strength of the adverse powers come against us, the rulers of darkness, those who command the world of evil, the principalities, the powers, the spirits of evil. They accuse our souls as in a lawsuit (*καὶ τρόπῳ τινὶ δίκης κατέχουσι τὴν ψυχὴν*), bringing before it all the sins it has committed, whether deliberately or through ignorance, from its youth until the time when it has been taken away. So they stand accusing (*κατηγοροῦντες*) it of all it has done. Furthermore, what anxiety do you suppose the soul will have at that hour, until sentence (*ἀπόφασις*) is pronounced and it gains its freedom. That is its hour of affliction, until it sees what will happen to it. On the other hand, the divine powers stand on the opposite side, and they present the good deeds of the soul. Consider the fear and trembling of the soul standing between them until in judgment it receives the sentence of the righteous Judge (*δικαίου κριτοῦ*). If it is worthy (*ἄξια*), the demons will receive their sanction (*ἐπιτίμιαν*), and it will be carried away by the angels.³¹

On one side of the courtroom are arrayed the devil and his demons, accusing the man's soul. This echoes a biblical theme that portrays Satan as the

³¹ Ward, 81 (revised); PG 65.200–1.

great adversary of man, whose only pleasure is to destroy man by depriving him of God's favor.³² In *Revelation*, Satan is called "the accuser of our brothers... who accuses them day and night before our God."³³ Theophilus reveals that the forces of evil attempt to usurp the prerogative of Christ; but it remains for the "righteous Judge" to pronounce sentence. The scenario also echoes a recurrent theme in the Old Testament, especially in *Psalms* and the prophetic writings. The righteousness of God's servants is denigrated by the enemies of Israel, and God is called upon to vindicate his servants from accusation.³⁴ Whereas the Psalmist once cried, "Judge me, O God, and vindicate my cause against an unholy people,"³⁵ here the soul silently awaits its verdict. As Abba Ammonas asks in another saying, "How shall I stand before the judgment seat of Christ (βήματι τοῦ χριστοῦ)? What can I say to him in my defense?"³⁶

³² John Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin*, trans. George Gabriel (Ridgewood: Zephyr, 2002), 71–8, 107. He also points out here that Job is a prime example of the devil falsely accusing man of being unrighteous. Interestingly, Job calls out to God to vindicate him against his accusers, an example of God's justification.

³³ *Revelation* 12:10.

³⁴ See Introduction, n. 23.

³⁵ *Psalms* 42:1: κρίνον με ὁ Θεός, καὶ δίκασον τὴν δίκην μου, ἐξ ἔθνους οὐχ ὁσίον.

³⁶ Ward, 26; PG 65.120.

Theophilus may have found his inspiration for his depiction of judgment in *Matthew* 25. Here the final judgment is likewise depicted as a trial (sans accusers).³⁷ Christ shall “sit upon the throne of his glory,” with all the nations of the world gathered before him awaiting judgment.³⁸ Like sheep and goats, he will divide humanity. The unrighteous—those who did not act according to love and mercy—will be condemned to Gehenna along with Satan and his legions. For the righteous, eternal life awaits. As the parable outlines, the actions of each person, in relationship to God and fellowman, shall either accuse or vindicate the soul under examination. As we shall explore further in Chapter Three, for the Desert Fathers vindication is equivalent to salvation: to be justified means to be judged as righteous before God.³⁹ Those

³⁷ *Matthew* 25:31–46.

³⁸ Cf. *Psalms* 9:7–8: “The Lord remains unto the ages: he has established his throne in judgment, and he judges the world in righteousness; he judges the peoples in uprightness.”

³⁹ In relation to this, John Chrysostom defines δικαιοσύνη as “vindication” as well. Commenting on *Romans*, he writes: “[St. Paul] says, in this way God is more justified. What does the word justified mean? That, if there could be a trial and an examination of the things he had done for the Jews, and of what had been done on their part towards him, the victory would be with God, and all the right on his side. And after showing this clearly from what was said before, he next introduces the prophet also as giving his approval to these things, and saying, ‘that thou mightest be justified in thy words, and prevail when thou art judged’ (*Psalms* 50:4). He then for his

deemed righteous by Jesus Christ are precisely those who act in the same way he does.

Both the Old and New Testaments state that man will be judged according to his works;⁴⁰ but his words will likewise reveal the inner content of a person's life. Quoting *Matthew* 12:37, Abba Poemen states, "If man remembered that it is written: 'By your words you will be justified (δικαιωθήσῃ) and by your words you will be condemned (καταδικασθήσῃ),' he would choose to remain silent (σιωπᾶν)."⁴¹ Both verbs in this verse from *Matthew* are in the future-passive tense, reminding us once again that judgment remains in the *eschaton*. But whether judgment occurs at the moment of one's death, or at the final tribunal, it remains that each person will be held accountable for their words. In light of this, Poeman recommends that it might be wiser (and safer) to resort to the positive silence commended in the monastic life than to disqualify oneself through frivolous words.

Abba Xanthias, on the other hand, contrasts the positive words of the thief with the negative deeds of Judas. He tells his disciples, "The thief was on the cross and he was justified (ἐδικαιώθη) by a single

part did everything, but they were nothing the better even for this." *NPNF*, vol. 11, 373 (revised).

⁴⁰ *Psalms* 61:12; 2 *Corinthians* 5:10; *Revelation* 20:12–3.

⁴¹ Ward, 173; *PG* 65.332. In instances in the *Sayings* such as this, where silence is recommended, one may see a connection with the emerging monastic tradition of *hesychasm* (ἡσυχία).

word; and Judas who was counted in the number of the apostles lost all his labor in one single night and descended from Heaven to Hades. Therefore, let no one boast of his good works, for all those who trust in themselves fall.”⁴² The impact of word and deed on eternity are not mutually exclusive. Poemen and Xanthius concur, and we return again to the perennial theme of the Publican and the Pharisee: the former was vindicated by his actions, while the latter was condemned.

During a reading from Genesis, Abba Agathon overhears a fellow monk condemn the patriarch Jacob for his cunningness. Agathon replies, “Let be, old man. If God vindicates, who shall condemn? (Εἰ ὁ Θεὸς ὁ δικαίων, τίς ὁ κατακρίνων;).”⁴³ This is nearly identical to Paul’s words in *Romans* 8: “God vindicates, who shall condemn? (Θεὸς ὁ δικαίων, τίς ὁ κατακρίνων;).”⁴⁴ In both instances, *δικαίω* is an active present-tense participle, revealing God’s very active power of judgment in the present. Agathon does not elaborate further on the meaning of *δικαιοσύνη*; but we may infer from his response that he knew *Romans*,

⁴² Ward, 159 (revised); PG 65.313. The verb *ἐδικαιώθη* is aorist-passive, indicating an action that has occurred and been completed in the past, enacted by an external agent. In both the Septuagint and the New Testament, passive voice is often used to signify that God is the agent, and that the human party is the recipient of the action.

⁴³ Ward, 23 (revised); PG 65.116.

⁴⁴ *Romans* 8:33–4.

and that he interpreted it in terms of God's sovereign prerogative to judge his creatures.

FEAR OF GOD. The *Alphabetical Collection* rarely divulges doctrinal disputes between monks, or between monastic communities; but the few excerpts we are given confirm that the *Sayings* reflect the orthodox Christology established at the first four ecumenical councils.⁴⁵ Thus, the monks whose *apophthegmata* are preserved therein would not be startled by the incredible paradox presented in the prologue to *John*: the eternal Son and Word of God, who existed with and within the Father from the beginning, has become truly man, entering into the cosmos that he himself created. The one who exists outside of time suddenly and simultaneously dwells within time. And with the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh, judgment likewise comes into the world. "For judgment I am come into this world," the Lord tells his disciples, "that they which see not might see;

⁴⁵ A few examples will suffice: Abba Sisoës chases away a group of Arians by reading a book by Athanasius (Ward, 217); Abba Miletius, while living in Persia, bears witness to the faith to a king's sons, calling Jesus the crucified God (Ward, 146); and Abba Phocas relates the story of an Abba James who, being courted by both Monophysites and Nestorians, remains united to the Orthodox in the end (Ward, 240-1). However, there is also some scholarly opinion that the redactors of the *Sayings* purged the text of all deviant theological views, especially monophysitism. See Chitty, 74.

and that they which see might be made blind.”⁴⁶ According to the Scriptures, the very presence of Jesus Christ is a conviction of sin and evil: “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”⁴⁷ Concomitantly, his passion and resurrection are a judgment upon corruption and death.⁴⁸ Ever since the fall of Adam, Satan, the accuser and adversary of man, had maintained a stronghold over man through sin and death. Prior to his arrest and trial, Jesus tells his apostles, “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.”⁴⁹ Christ’s victory is Satan’s defeat. The judgment of the fallen world, and the evil forces that have unjustly lorded over it, occurs now in the present age, in and through the incarnate Messiah. This biblical view marks the eschatological understanding of the Desert Fathers—though judgment awaits in the future, Christ and his judgment is ever present, the *eschaton* irrupting into each moment.

For Christians, the incarnation of the Lord marks the beginning of the “good news” (*εὐαγγέλιον*), announcing the grace and mercy of God for all mankind. Yet the return of Jesus Christ at the close of the age is oftentimes associated with fearful judgment.

⁴⁶ *John* 9:39.

⁴⁷ *John* 3:19.

⁴⁸ See *1 Corinthians* 15:20–8.

⁴⁹ *John* 12:31. Cf. *John* 16:7–11.

For the Desert Fathers, the presence of the Lord is always a manifestation of both these realities. Harkening back to the Old Testament prophets, the coming (*παρουσία*) of the Lord is seen as a revelation of both divine mercy and judgment. Amos warns, "Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! To what end is it for you? The day of the Lord is darkness, and not light."⁵⁰ For the Desert Fathers, how one perceives the coming of the Lord depends on how well he is prepared to meet him. Illustrative of this theme in the *apophthegmata* is this brief story: "It was said of Abba Or and Abba Theodore that as they were building a cell out of clay, they said to one another, 'If God should visit us now, what should we do?' Then, weeping, they left the clay there and each of them went back into his cell."⁵¹ Here, mindfulness of final judgment is no mere intellectual exercise; rather, their perception of spiritual reality enables them to envisage judgment as immanent. Abba Agathon advises, "At every hour, a man should be aware of the judgment of God (*τῷ κριτηρίῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ*)."⁵² Abba Silvanus receives a sobering vision of the perpetual judgment that confirms the two previous sayings. While sitting with some other monks, "he came into ecstasy (*ἐγένετο ἐν ἑκστάσει*) and fell with his face to the ground." When asked what he saw, he responded, "I was taken up to

⁵⁰ Amos 5:18.

⁵¹ Ward, 246; PG 65.437.

⁵² Ward, 24 (revised); PG 65.116.

see the judgment (*κρίσιν*) and I saw there many of our kind coming to punishment (*κόλασιν*) and many seculars going into the kingdom.”⁵³

In the ascetical life of the Desert Fathers, one way vigilance (*νήψις*) was preserved was through the remembrance of the dread judgment seat of Christ. The monks lived out daily the “inaugurated eschatology” of the earliest Christian communities, bringing the eternal judgment of Christ to the fore at every moment. Behind this eschatological vision is the biblical aphorism, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”⁵⁴ In the *Sayings*, remembrance of judgment is synonymous with the fear of God. Abba John the Dwarf places fear of God, coupled with humility, above all other virtues.⁵⁵ And Abba Cronius, when asked, “Through what work (*πράγματος*) does a monk come to the fear of God?” replies, “According to me, he should withdraw himself from every work and give himself to afflicting his body; and with all his strength, he should remember the departure (*ἐξόδου*) from his body and the judgment of God (*κρίσεως τοῦ Θεοῦ*).”⁵⁶ Similarly, Abba Anthony teaches, “Always have the fear of God before your eyes; remember he who gives death (*θανατοῦντος*) and life (*ζωογο-*

⁵³ Ward, 222 (revised); PG 65.408.

⁵⁴ *Psalms* 110:10; *Proverbs* 9:10.

⁵⁵ Ward, 90.

⁵⁶ Ward, 115 (revised); PG 65.248.

νοῦντος).⁵⁷ In contemplating death and judgment, Abba Anthony draws the end into the present; and with mindfulness of God's judgment also comes mindfulness of God's constant presence.

As the evidence makes plain, the Desert Fathers were acutely aware of death and its connection to judgment — to remember one's end is to remember what it means to fall into the hands of the living God. In one *apophthegma*, Abba Evagrius advises, "Always keep your death in mind and do not forget the eternal judgment, then there will be no fault in your soul."⁵⁸ In another saying, he elaborates:

Remember the day of your death ... Remember also what happens in Hades and think about the state of the souls down there, their painful silence, their most bitter groanings, their fear, their strife, their waiting. Think of their grief without end and the tears their souls shed eternally. But keep the day of resurrection and of presentation (*παραστάσεως*) to God in remembrance also. Imagine the fearful and terrible judgment ... Consider also the good things in store for the righteous: confidence in the face of God the Father, and His Son, the angels and archangels and all the people of the holy ones, the kingdom of heaven, and the gifts of that

⁵⁷ Ward, 8 (revised); PG 65.85.

⁵⁸ Ward, 64 (revised); PG 65.173.

realm, joy and beatitude. Keep in mind the remembrance of these two realities. On the other hand, mourn and weep for the judgment of sinners; fearing lest you yourself experience these things also.⁵⁹

As Evagrius intimates, the fear of God — actuated as remembrance of judgment before Christ — is a powerful weapon in the monk's spiritual arsenal. The ascetic life led by the Desert Fathers consisted primarily in fighting temptation, transforming the passions and cultivating virtues. The result of such work was the acquisition of dispassion (ἀπάθεια), a state in which the body and soul of a person is no longer enslaved to desires and sinful impulses, becoming free to follow the will of God.⁶⁰ In similar fashion, Abba Cronius advises that the moment one's spirit "remembers the eternal judgment (μνημονεύση τῆς αἰωνίου κρίσεως), immediately the passion falls away and disappears."⁶¹ Underlying such recommendations is an entire scriptural and patristic context in which the Christian is constantly reminded to be

⁵⁹ Ward, 63–4 (revised); PG 65. 173.

⁶⁰ Evagrius' sayings in the *Alphabetical Collection* reflect the general tenor of the whole collection in regards to asceticism. However, his other writings, such as *The Praktikos*, are known for their Origenistic tendencies. How Evagrius would define ἀπάθεια would differ from his fellow monks preserved in the *Sayings*, but this does not affect our present study in any way.

⁶¹ Ward, 115 (revised); PG 65.248.

prepared for the coming of the Lord at any moment. In *Matthew*, the parable of the ten virgins is summarized in the warning, "And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him."⁶² The virgins who were not prepared were subsequently shut out of the kingdom of heaven. This verse would later become a fixed portion of the monastic office of Nocturns (μεσονυκτικόν), remaining a part of the Byzantine liturgical cycle even unto modern times.

In some instances, remembrance of death and judgment are couched within overtly juridical terms, recalling the courtroom images of the Old Testament in which Israel is put on trial by Yahweh. Amma Syncletica, one of three Desert Mothers whose sayings are preserved in the *Alphabetical Collection*, recommends contemplating the eternal judgment in order to overcome satanic temptation: "Bring to your memory the punishment to come, the eternal fire and the honorable judges (τῶν δικαστικῶν τιμωριῶν), and do not be discouraged here and now."⁶³ Abba Ammonas is even more explicit in his forensic description:

Go, make your thoughts like those of the evildoers who are in prison. For they are always asking the men when the authority will come, awaiting him in anxiety. Thus the monk ought to pray

⁶² *Matthew* 25:6.

⁶³ Ward, 232 (revised); PG 65.424.

always, and to convict (ἐλέγχειν) his own soul, saying, ‘Unhappy wretch that I am. How shall I stand before the judgment seat of Christ (βήματι τοῦ χριστοῦ)? What shall I say to him in my defense (ἀπολογήσασθαι)?’ If you give yourself continually to this, you may be saved.⁶⁴

Implied in Ammonas’ words is the fact that man, in his sins, is without defense before Jesus Christ, who himself assumed human flesh and proved that human nature is not itself the source of evil. In the words of a much later interpreter of the ascetic tradition, Gregory Palamas, as a result of the incarnation, “God was justified as well, not in any way being the cause and making of evil.”⁶⁵

Though judgment is often portrayed in drastic and fearful terms, this is not always the case for the Desert Fathers. A saying of Abba Sisoës is instructive:

A brother asked Abba Sisoës, ‘What shall I do, abba, for I have fallen?’ The old man said to him, ‘Get up again (ἀνάστα πάλιν).’ The brother said, ‘I have got up again, but I have fallen again.’ The old man said, ‘Get up again and again.’ So then the brother said, ‘How many

⁶⁴ Ward, 26 (revised); PG 65.120.

⁶⁵ Homily 16.10 in *The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas*, trans. Christopher Veniamin (South Canaan: Mount Thabor Press, 2009).

times?’ The old man said, ‘Until you are taken up either in virtue or in fallenness (πτώματι). For in that state which a man finds himself, in that state will he also depart.’⁶⁶

Here the monastic life is presented as opportunity — every fall is a chance to rise again, until the day the monk dies.

The Desert Fathers often remind us that fear of God and remembrance of judgment, as with every other aspect of ascetic practice, must not become an end in itself. The goal is to acquire love for God. As Abba Anthony declared, “I no longer fear God, but I love him; for ‘love casts out fear’ (1 John 4.18).”⁶⁷ The citation from 1 John in context reveals that Anthony here speaks of union with God:

God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ward, 219-20 (revised); PG 65.404.

⁶⁷ Ward, 8; PG 65.

⁶⁸ 1 John 4:16-9.

Fear of God, as judgment, is both a stage and a continuous awareness in the monastic life which ultimately leads to union with God. To preserve constant awareness of God is to perceive his constant judgment and vindication as one united action — the pouring out of his love for his creature.

PRREROGATIVE OF JUDGMENT. In the dialogue between God and man, only the former possesses the right to judge. The Desert Fathers preserved an acute sense of God's sovereign authority over his creatures, which precludes man's right to judge others. For a monk to pass judgment on another meant to usurp the prerogative of the Lord. This belief is firmly rooted in the New Testament ethic: "[J]udge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God"⁶⁹ In a story from the *Sayings* reminiscent of the Old Testament tale of Balaam,⁷⁰ Abba Isaac the Theban discovers the danger of judging others:

One day Abba Isaac went to a monastery. He saw a brother falling (*σφαλέντα*) and he condemned (*κατέκρινεν*) him. When he returned to the desert, an angel of the Lord came and stood in front

⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 4:5.

⁷⁰ Numbers 22.

of the door of his cell, and said, "I will not let you enter." But he persisted, saying, "What is the matter?" and the angel replied, "God has sent me to ask you where you want to cast the fallen brother whom you have condemned (*ἐκρίνας*)?" Immediately he repented and said, "I have sinned, forgive me." Then the angel said, "Get up, God has forgiven you. But from now on, be careful not to judge someone before God has judged him"⁷¹

By placing himself in God's position as judge, Abba Isaac has instead brought judgment upon himself. The action of God, mediated through his angel, is meant to bring the elder to repentance, not simply to make light of his sin. In effect, Abba Isaac is preemptively judged. But when he chooses the way of the Publican rather than that of the Pharisee, he is forgiven by God. Before God, the righteousness of man — even that of a holy elder — is as filthy rags.⁷²

In a saying with a similar theme, Abba Paphnutius likewise finds himself at a point of discernment. Walking along a path one evening, he spies some villagers and, overhearing their conversation, is struck by the evil content of their words. "So I stood still, praying for my sins," he relates, "and behold, an angel came holding a sword, and he says to me, 'Paphnutius, all those who judge their brothers perish

⁷¹ Ward, 109–10 (revised); PG 65.240.

⁷² Cf. *Isaiah* 64:6.

by his sword, but because you have not judged, but have humbled yourself before God, saying that you have sinned, your name is written in the book of the living!”⁷³ Interpreting the dominical saying, “for all they that take the sword shall perish by the sword,”⁷⁴ the angel informs Paphnutius that judging others will bring the same fate upon oneself. The Gospel neatly encapsulates this spiritual principle with the axiom, “Judge not that ye be not judged.”⁷⁵ *James* puts it another way: “So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.”⁷⁶

Allowing God to fulfill his role as judge and arbiter is seen as a sign of trust in the Lord. The incessant desire to condemn others, to defend oneself, or to set aright the injustices in the world is taken as a lack of faith in God:

A brother who was wronged (ἀδικηθείς) by another brother came to Abba Sisoës, and he

⁷³ Ward, 202; PG 65.377. The “book of the living” (βιβλὴ ζώντων) spoken of here is also referred to in *Psalms* 68:28; *Philippians* 4:3; and *Revelation* 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 15, 21:27, 22:19. This is a Semitic term imbued with eschatological meaning, relating to the final judgment and the fate of the righteous.

⁷⁴ *Matthew* 26:52.

⁷⁵ *Matthew* 7:1. Cf. Ward, 151–2, where Abba Mark quotes this passage when he hears a man denigrating the local clergy.

⁷⁶ *James* 2:12–3.

says to him, 'My brother has wronged me for something and I want to avenge (*ἐκδικῆσαι*) myself.' But the old man pleaded with him saying, 'No, my child, leave vengeance to God.' He said to him, 'I shall not rest until I have avenged myself.' The old man said, 'Brother, let us pray.' Then the old man arose and said, 'God, we no longer need you to care for us, since we do justice for ourselves (*ἐκδίκησιν ἑαυτῶν ποιῶμεν*).' Hearing these words, the brother fell at the old man's feet, saying, 'I will not again vindicate myself (*δικάζομαι*) with my brother; forgive me, abba.'⁷⁷

This saying ties together divine judgment with another concept — theodicy. The existence of injustice and evil in the world has prompted Christians in every age to question the righteousness and sovereignty ascribed to God. Sisoës reminds the monk that ultimate judgment and justice lie with God, and will be accomplished according to his economy. Similarly, when Abba Anthony once pondered the "depths of the judgments of God" (*βάθος τῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ κριμάτων*), asking why some die young and others live to a very old age, he heard a voice say to him, "Anthony, keep your attention on yourself; these things are the judgments of God (*κρίματα Θεοῦ*), and it is not beneficial

⁷⁷ Ward, 212 (revised); PG 65.392.

for you to learn anything about them.”⁷⁸ Rather than offering a complex statement of theodicy, the mysterious voice offers a simple response that elicits faith and trust in God and his judgment.

It should come as no surprise that caveats against judging others are ubiquitous in the sayings of the Desert Fathers. In a letter from Abba Moses to Abba Poemen we read, “The monk must die to his neighbor and never judge him at all, in any way whatever.”⁷⁹ Abba Paphnutius asked his spiritual father Macarius the Great for a word, and was told, “Do no evil to anyone, and do not condemn (κατακρίῳης) anyone. Observe this and you will be saved.”⁸⁰ And Abba Euprepus tells his disciple, “If a man has for himself humility and poverty, and if he does not judge, the fear of God will come to him.”⁸¹ In these sayings the referent is the final and sovereign judgment of Christ. *James* echoes the same idea: “Do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door!”⁸²

In the gospels, the converse of “condemn and you will be condemned” is “forgive and you will be forgiven.”⁸³ There are several aspects to this recipro-

⁷⁸ Ward, 2; PG 65.76.

⁷⁹ Ward, 141; PG 65.288.

⁸⁰ Ward, 133 (revised); PG 65.273.

⁸¹ Ward, 62 (revised); PG 65.172.

⁸² *James* 5:9.

⁸³ *Luke* 6:37.

cal understanding of the relationship between man and God, and between man and his neighbor. For example, a monk should seek to cover the nakedness of others, rather than exposing their faults.⁸⁴ "A brother questioned Abba Poemen saying, 'If I see my brother stumbling (πταῖσμα), is it good to conceal it? The old man said to him, 'At the very moment when we hide our brother's fall, God hides our; and at the moment when we reveal our brother's fall, God also reveals our fall.'"⁸⁵ The action (or reaction) of God here is immediate, yet there is no indication of a deliberate and public manifestation of one's sins. God is not depicted in any of the *Sayings* (especially in those *apophthegmata* attributed to Poemen) as being vengeful or settling the score. Rather, what is experienced here is the diminution of God's protecting presence. A saying of Abba Orsisius conveys the same teaching, "[T]hrough the soul's negligence, the Holy Spirit gradually withdraws until his warmth is completely extinguished."⁸⁶

Although judging others distances oneself from God, judging one's own sins results in the opposite effect — what is seen as negative results in a positive. The power of the Publican's prayer is contained in his humble self-condemnation. King David cried out, "For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is

⁸⁴ Cf. *Genesis* 9:20–6.

⁸⁵ Ward, 175 (revised), *PG* 65.337.

⁸⁶ Ward, 162, *PG* 65.316.

ever before me; against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.”⁸⁷ There is a sense in which every sin committed, whether in thought, word or deed, is really a sin against God, thus entailing a turning from him. But self-condemnation becomes the catalyst to reestablishing this relationship. Looking again at the saying of Epiphanius from the beginning of this chapter, we begin to understand its reality: “The Canaanite woman cries out (βοᾷ) and is heard; and the woman with the issue of blood is silent and blessed; but the Pharisee cries out (κράζει) and he is condemned (κατακρίνεται); the publican does not open his mouth and is heard.”⁸⁸ In the first example, the Canaanite woman and the hemorrhaging woman are compared. One cried out, while the other remained silent; but both acted in faith and humility and were answered by Christ. In the second example, the arrogant and self-righteous Pharisee “cries out,” but in pretense. But the humble self-condemnation of the Publican invites God’s favor. In comparing these four characters, Epiphanius is not criticizing loquacity, nor commending silence as an end in itself (since both silence and speaking are presented in a positive light in the first example). As we examined earlier, it is the content of one’s words (or thoughts) that determines the

⁸⁷ *Psalm* 50:3–4.

⁸⁸ Ward, 57–8 (revised); *PG* 65.165.197.

judgment of God. The action of the Publican, who chooses to judge himself rather than others, is the reason for his justification.

When Archbishop Theophilus was once asked, "Father, in this way of life which you follow, what do you find to be best?" he responded, "The act of accusing myself, and of constantly reproaching myself to myself. . . . There is no other way but this."⁸⁹ Throughout the New Testament, self-condemnation is presented as a way to avoid God's ultimate condemnation. "But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged," writes Paul.⁹⁰ This path becomes a personal descent into Hades which then results in God's exaltation.

The spiritual state that results from voluntary self-abasement is one of discernment and love for others. One of the more famous stories of the *Alpha-betical Collection* is that of Abba Moses and the water jug. Though somewhat humorous, this anecdote reveals important spiritual truths:

A brother at Scetis had fallen. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, 'Come, for everyone is waiting for you.' So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it

⁸⁹ Ward, 80-1; PG 65.197.

⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:31.

with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, 'What is this, father?' The old man said to them, 'My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.' When they heard that they said no more to the brother but forgave him.⁹¹

Abba Moses the Ethiopian was well known as a former thief and murderer who, after accepting the monastic habit, became one of the greatest spiritual fathers of the Egyptian desert. His tremendous repentance and self-accusation led to a disposition characterized by extreme mercy. In the above story, Abba Moses follows in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, revealing truth to his fellow monks through seemingly nonsensical behavior. But the lesson was well taken, and the accused brother was forgiven — not because of his innocence, but because the others remembered that the prerogative to judge man for his sin rests solely with God.

In the extensive sayings of Abba Agathon, we find an incident which at first glance seems to convey the opposite understanding to that of Abba Moses. Entering into a large gathering of monks in the midst of deliberation (we are not given what they were deciding about), Agathon objects to their final

⁹¹ Ward, 139; *PG* 65.281–4.

judgment on the matter. "Who are you ... to talk like that?" the other monks retort. The elder calmly ripostes, "A son of man ... for it is written, 'If truly you say that which is righteous, judge rightly, sons of men' (*Psalms* 5:1)."⁹² This passage seemingly conflicts with the general tenor of the *apophthegmata*. But upon deeper investigation, we find that Abba Agathon has not vindicated himself, but condemned himself. The verse from *Psalms*, within its original context, is a query that is answered beginning with the very next verse of the same psalm: "Yea, in heart ye work wickedness; ye weigh the violence of your hands in the earth." The remainder of the psalm makes it abundantly clear that the "sons of men" do not judge rightly, and instead are the cause of violence and wickedness. By quoting this psalm, and referring to himself as a "son of men," Agathon squarely places himself with the unrighteous, those condemned by God. His objection to the assembly's decision is born from discernment; and his response to their condemnation is born from humility.

In another saying concerning Agathon, we discover the inner spiritual movement that occurs in self-condemnation. "Whenever his thoughts urged him to judge something that he saw, he would say to himself, 'Agathon, it is not your business to do that.' And thus his thought was silenced (ὁ λογισμὸς

⁹² Ward, 22; PG 65.113.

αὐτοῦ ἡσύχαζεν).”⁹³ Judging himself, Agathon is able to resist the urge to judge others. But delving more deeply into this saying, we find that self-condemnation is an entrance into the divine silence where man encounters God. In his presence, man is able to see himself clearly, as is noted in *1 John*: “[W]henever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”⁹⁴ God’s presence brings his judgment directly to the heart of man, who must then accept condemnation and turn to God. This brings together the multiple aspects of judgment in the Desert Fathers — fear of God, mindfulness of the dread judgment seat, abstention from judging others and the acquisition of humility are all bound up in one movement toward salvation, which lies beyond judgment.

⁹³ Ward, 23; PG 65.113.

⁹⁴ *1 John* 3:19.

CHAPTER TWO

Humility

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, we already broached the subject of our present focus: humility (*ταπείνωσης*). A saying of Amma Syncletica introduces this, our second major theme: “Imitate the Publican so that you will not be co-condemned (*συγκατακριθῇς*) with the Pharisee. Choose the meekness (*πραῶν*) of Moses and you will find your heart which is stone changed into a fountain of water.”¹ The second line explains the first; it is the meekness of the Publican that saves him.² According to Syncletica, the action of humbling oneself leads to a general state of humility, of which meekness and compassion (the conversion of the stony heart) are attributes. Another definition of *ταπεινός* is “lowly.” As we shall explore in this chapter, the Desert Fathers present the act of self-condemnation as a path of personal descent, leading to a humble disposition wherein an encounter with the righteous God is facilitated and man is justified.

¹ Ward, 233 (revised); PG 65.425.

² Although meekness is not exactly synonymous with humility, they are oftentimes used interchangeably in the *Sayings*.

HUMILITY AND SELF-CONDEMNATION. Abba John, called "the Dwarf" (ὁ κολοβός) on account of his short stature, once asked his fellow monks, "Who sold Joseph?" With the literal events of Genesis in mind, one of the monks replied, "It was his brethren." Abba John responded, "No, it was his humility (ταπείνωσις) which sold him, because he could have said, 'I am their brother' and have objected; but, because he kept silence (σιωπῶν), he sold himself by his humility. It is also his humility which set him up as chief in Egypt."³ Behind Abba John's exegesis lies a Christian equation for the spiritual life: "[W]hosoever exalteth himself shall be abased (ταπεινωθήσεται), and he that humbleth (ταπεινῶν) himself shall be exalted (ὑψωθήσεται)."⁴ In choosing the path of humility (again equated here with silence) the patriarch Joseph is exalted. But something more profound is implied in the *apophthegma*. Abba John does not refer merely to specific moments in which Joseph humbled himself; rather, Joseph's mode of being radiates this virtue. As the narrative in *Genesis* outlines, Joseph cooperated with God's plan rather than opposed it. The resultant state of humility and meekness that led to his exaltation (as Pharaoh's governor) may be taken as an allegory for exaltation at the final judgment.

A person who is not humble is "full of himself," as the common expression goes. In such a person

³ Ward, 90; PG 65.212.

⁴ Luke 14:11.

there is no room for God to act; hence, grace flees. To quote again the saying from Abba Orsisius that we examined in Chapter One, “[T]he Holy Spirit gradually withdraws until his warmth is completely extinguished.”⁵ Humility is the antidote to pride; and many of the Desert Fathers elevate humility above every other virtue. As Abba Or reflects, “The crown of the monk is humble-mindedness (ταπεινοφροσύνη).”⁶ Humility becomes more than a single act; it becomes a state of being, reflected by the coupling of “humble” (ταπεινός) with “mindset” (φρόνησις). Without such a spiritual state, the efforts of the monk remain futile. The power of humble-mindedness is so great, it is capable of banishing demons. Amma Theodora relates that,

[N]either asceticism, nor vigils nor any kind of suffering are able to save, if you do not know humble-mindedness (ταπεινοφροσύνη). There was an anchorite who was able to banish demons; and he asked them, ‘What makes you go away? Is it fasting?’ They replied, ‘We do not eat or drink.’ ‘Is it vigils?’ They replied, ‘We do not sleep.’ ‘Is it separation from the world?’ ‘We live in the deserts.’ ‘What power sends you away then?’ They said, ‘Nothing can overcome us except humble-mindedness.’ Do you see

⁵ Ward, 162; PG 65.316.

⁶ Ward, 247 (revised); PG 65.440.

how humble-mindedness is victorious over the demons?⁷

In the traditional Christian cosmogony, the origin of evil is not God, but pride. The hubris of Lucifer led to his exile from the heavens. Satan was not created evil, yet evil was realized through the misuse of his free will. Proverbs preserves the adage, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."⁸ For Satan and his demonic minions, their very mode of existence is the result of pride. They are unable to cultivate the virtue of humility — and any sign of it repels them. But the danger of pride remains the same for man as it did for Satan and his fallen angels. To be "lifted up with pride" is to "fall into the condemnation of the devil."⁹

The value of self-condemnation was born from the experience of desert spirituality. In their effort to live the Gospel, to incarnate it within their person, the Desert Fathers came to understand the methodology to acquiring humility. Abba Poemen "said, groaning, 'All the virtues come to this house (οἶκον) except one, and without that virtue it is hard for a man to stand.' Then they asked him, 'What is it?' and he said, 'For a man to blame himself (μέμψεται

⁷ Ward, 84 (revised); PG 65.204. Cf. the saying of Abba Macarius, Ward, 129–30; PG 65.268.

⁸ Proverbs 16:18.

⁹ 1 Timothy 3:6.

ἐαυτόν).”¹⁰ His understanding of this virtue is contained in the verb *μέμφομαι*, which literally means “to complain against.”¹¹ The entrance to humility is through self-condemnation, through the act of finding fault in oneself rather than others. The house that Poemen refers to is most likely his own person; so it is himself whom he blames for not having acquired this virtue. Like a house built on an unstable foundation, a monk who does not complain against himself is unable to stand — a fall is inevitable.

Self-condemnation is both the negation of pride and the invitation to grace. According to Abba Poemen,

The reason why we are so greatly tempted is because we do not guard our name and status, as Scripture says. Do we not see that the Savior gave peace to the Canaanite woman, accepting her as she was? And the same for Abigail, because she said to David, “Upon me alone be the guilt” (*1 Samuel*. 25:34), the Lord heard her and loved her. Abigail stands for the soul and David for God (*Ἀβιγαῖα πρόσωπον λαμβάνει τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ Δαυὶδ τῆς Θεότητος*). So when the soul blames itself before the Lord, the Lord loves the soul.¹²

¹⁰ Ward, 186 (revised); *PG* 65.356.

¹¹ Lampe, 842.

¹² Ward, 177 (revised); *PG* 65.340. The second to last sentence, translated literally renders: “Abigail receives the face

Here, Abigail and the Canaanite woman are analogs for the soul that has descended from pride to humility through self-condemnation. The monk who stands before God, and like the Publican blames only himself, empties himself of pride and self-will, and so is able to establish a relationship with the Lord springing forth from divine love. The humble-mindedness that results from self-condemnation is the prerequisite for attracting the grace of God. Conversely, "God resisteth the proud,"¹³ and grace cannot dwell where conceit already reigns. Jesus Christ describes himself as "meek and lowly in heart,"¹⁴ and his Spirit will not be received by a heart that has not prepared itself with humility.

The most harshly condemned group in the gospels is the Pharisees. On several occasions, the Lord castigates these Jewish authorities for their hypocrisy. "[Y]e are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."¹⁵ An *apophthegma* of Abba Anthony the Great paraphrases this biblical passage in order to warn his monks about the danger of hypocrisy in the spiritual life: "The brothers praised

[or "representation"] of the soul, and David of the Divinity."

¹³ *Proverbs* 3:34; *James* 4:6; *1 Peter* 5:5.

¹⁴ *Matthew* 11:29.

¹⁵ *Matthew* 23:27-8.

a monk before Abba Anthony. When the monk came to see him, Anthony wanted to know how he would bear insults; and seeing that he could not bear them at all, he said to him, 'You are like a village magnificently decorated on the outside, but destroyed from within by robbers.'"¹⁶ In the contemplative life, there is no room for false humility. Hypocrisy is depicted as a conscious effort to appear humble externally, even when one has not inwardly appropriated the virtue. Abba Anthony knows that the monk he encountered has not acquired humility because he is unable to bear condemnation. A man who has already judged himself is not injured when others judge him.

Self-condemnation expels hypocrisy. "Abba Sarmatas said, 'I prefer a sinful man who knows he has sinned and repents, to a man who has not sinned and makes himself to be righteous (*δικαιοσύνην ποιοῦντα*).'"¹⁷ We may infer from Sarmatas' statement that no man is given the right to proclaim his own righteousness. To do so is to fall into the trap of the Pharisee — "Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts, for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God."¹⁸ Trusting in God to vindicate oneself, rather than relying on one's own virtue, is a fruit of humility. Through self-condemnation, the

¹⁶ Ward, 4; PG 65.80.

¹⁷ Ward, 225; PG 65.413.

¹⁸ *Luke* 16:15.

monk allows God to act. Navigation within the monastic life is contrary to human logic: to ascend, one must first descend.

VOLUNTARY DESCENT. The Desert Fathers maintained an acute awareness of their unworthiness in the presence of God. Abba Matoes explains that, "The nearer a man draws to God, the more he sees himself a sinner. For when Isaiah the prophet saw God, he accused himself and called himself unclean (*τάλαν και ἀκάθαρτον ἔλεγεν ἑαυτόν*)."¹⁹ The allusion is to the theophany in *Isaiah* 6, when the prophet "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." Isaiah found himself standing in the presence of the living God, yet he could only think of his unworthiness: "Woe is me, I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips!"²⁰ The prophet's experience is confirmed by Abba Matoes. As the monk ascends to God in the spiritual life, he comes into contact with the holiness and purity of divinity. But this draws a comparison between divinity and his human condition, revealing how far one is from God. The closer the proximity to God, the more obvious sin becomes.

Even so, the Desert Fathers understood that it is precisely for the sake of sinners that the Son of God came into the world: "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ

¹⁹ Ward, 143 (revised); PG 65.289.

²⁰ *Isaiah* 6.5.

died for us.”²¹ In an incident related by Abba Paul the Simple, a disciple of Anthony, we learn of the depths of God’s mercy.²² One day, before the time of the *synaxis*, Abba Paul stood outside the monastery church and observed all the brethren as they entered in. God revealed the spiritual state of each monk as he passed by. The countenance of each monk was bright and joyful — except for the last to enter. Abba Paul perceived a darkness around this monk, and demons surrounded him. Later, after the service ended, Paul witnessed this same monk leaving the church, his face shining and his spirit joyful. The demons could not come near the monk, and his guardian angel was following him rejoicing. Amazed by this turn of events, Abba Paul called the brethren together and revealed what he saw. Then the monk who experienced this drastic change told his story: “I am a sinful man. I have lived in fornication for a long time, right up to the present moment; When I went into the holy church of God, I heard the holy prophet Isaiah being read ... ‘though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool’ (*Isaiah* 1.18). And I ... the fornicator, am filled with compunction in my heart ... and I groan within myself, saying to God, ‘God, who came into the world to save sinners, that which you now proclaim by the mouth of your

²¹ *Romans* 5:8.

²² Ward, 205–6; PG 65.381–5.

prophet, fulfill in me who am a sinner and an unworthy man.” In this account, the role of Scripture in the spiritual life of the monk is revealed. Like Anthony the Great, whose monastic vocation was inspired by the gospel he heard read in the church, the unnamed monk in the narrative is brought to repentance by a single verse from *Isaiah*. Hearing of God’s mercy, the monk is driven to heartfelt repentance.

If we balance this saying of Abba Paul against the previous saying of Abba Matoes (both of which, interestingly, are based on a citation from *Isaiah*), we find that consciousness of sin in the life of the monk was not an occasion for despair (ἀκηδία), but for rejoicing in God’s mercy. Hence, the *Sayings* preserve a certain tension between joy (recognizing God’s love) and sorrow (recognizing the condition of sin). It may be said that this tension is purposely cultivated. For Poemen, the process of comparing oneself to God is not involuntary, but rather an intentional act of self-condemnation. “Abba Poemen said to Abba Joseph, ‘Tell me how to become a monk.’ He said, ‘If you want to find rest here below, and hereafter, in all circumstances say, “Who am I (ἐγὼ τίς εἰμι)?” and do not judge anyone.’”²³ Hidden within this saying is a subtle allusion to the words of Christ in *John*. On several occasions, Christ refers to himself as “I Am” (ἐγὼ εἰμι); but here Poemen recommends the opposite, advising

²³ Ward, 102; PG 65.228.

Joseph of Panephysis to say instead, “Who am I?” By comparing himself with Christ, the monk is able to see how far from perfection he is. And at the same time, such an exercise eliminates any desire to judge others. Along the same lines, Abba Or gives the following counsel,

Whenever you want to subdue your high and proud thoughts, examine your conscience carefully: Have you kept all the commandments? Have you loved your enemies and been kind to them in their misfortunes? Have you counted yourself to be an unprofitable servant and the worst of all sinners? If you find you have done all this, do not therefore think well of yourself as if you had done everything well, but realize that even the thought of such things is totally destructive (ὁ λογισμὸς πάντα καταλύει).²⁴

The ability to fulfill all the commandments, and to love one's enemies, are acts ascribed to Jesus Christ in the gospels. To evaluate oneself in comparison to Christ remains the key to discovering humility. An echo of *Luke 17:10* is also found in this saying: “So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our

²⁴ Ward, 247–8 (revised); PG 65.440.

duty to do.” Yet Abba Or goes even further, telling us that, having fulfilled this gospel prescript, do not be tempted even then to think well of oneself. In order to reach a state of authentic humility, the Desert Fathers constantly reiterate the need to voluntarily descend. The person who thinks well of himself vindicates himself before the sinless and righteous God, rather than condemning himself and allowing God to vindicate. As the Psalmist laments, “What is man that Thou art mindful of him?”²⁵ When man remembers his insignificance before the Creator of the vast cosmos, it fosters a proper sense of proportion. Man is left speechless, no longer able to offer a defense for his sins.

If it is right for man to refrain from defending his actions, it is an even greater feat for man to condemn himself. Whereas the former response is passive, self-condemnation is an active appropriation of repentance. “Abba John said, ‘We have put the light burden on one side, that is to say, blaming ourselves (ἐαυτοὺς μέμψεσθαι), and we have loaded ourselves with a heavy one, that is to say, vindicating ourselves (δικαιοῦν ἐαυτούς).’”²⁶ We may rightly ask, how is self-condemnation the lighter burden, when it would seem that is easier to justify one’s actions? In general, self-justification is a spontaneous reaction to any insinuation of condemnation from without. However,

²⁵ *Psalms* 8:4.

²⁶ Ward, 90 (revised); PG 65.211.

many confuse the easier task for the more difficult. To condemn oneself is to descend, comparing oneself to Christ who said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."²⁷ But to vindicate oneself places a person in opposition to God, and in the end results in condemnation before the dread judgment seat, therefore making it the heavier burden.

At the request of Abba Poemen, Abba Moses compiled a series of seven spiritual instructions for monastics; but in fact these sayings are universal in scope and application. The longest and most elaborate of these instructions concentrates on the theme of self-condemnation and refraining from judgment:

A brother asked the old man, 'Here is a man who beats his servant because of a fault he has committed; what will the servant say?' The old man said, 'If the servant is good, he should say, "Forgive me, I have sinned."' The brother said to him, 'Nothing else?' The old man said, 'No, for from the moment he takes upon himself responsibility for the affair and says, "I have sinned," immediately the Lord will have mercy on him. The aim in all these things is not to judge one's neighbor. For truly, when the hand of the Lord caused all the first-born in the land of Egypt to die, no house was without its dead.'

²⁷ *Matthew* 11:30.

The brother said, 'What does that mean?' The old man said, 'If we are on the watch to see our own faults, we shall not see those of our neighbor. It is folly for a man who has a dead person in his house to leave him there and go to weep over his neighbor's dead. To die to one's neighbor is this: to bear your own faults and not to pay attention to anyone else wondering whether they are good or bad. Do no harm to anyone, do not think anything bad in you heart towards anyone, do not scorn the man who does evil, do not put confidence in him who does wrong to his neighbor, do not rejoice with him who injures his neighbor. This is what dying to one's neighbor means. Do not rail against anyone, but rather say, 'God knows each one.' Do not agree with him who slanders, do not rejoice at his slander and do not hate him who slanders his neighbor. This is what it means not to judge. Do no have hostility towards any man and do not let hostility dominate in your heart; do not hate him who has hostility against his neighbor. This is what peace is: Encourage yourself with his thought: affliction lasts but a short time, while repose is forever, by the grace of the Word of God. Amen.'²⁸

²⁸ Ward, 142-3. PG 65.288-9.

The magnitude of repentance herein portrayed seems almost beyond human strength; but perhaps this is precisely the point. As Abba Moses mentions at the end of the saying, grace is necessary to accomplish such a feat. His instruction here transcends the genre of mere spiritual advice, and takes on the form of a prayer (hence its ending with "Amen"). Only God can enable the monk to reach the very depths of humility. In the abyss of self-condemnation, a monk's life begins to take on a cosmic dimension. His heart enlarges, and he embraces all creatures and all things within himself.²⁹

In the same way that the monk immersed in a state of deep repentance finds it painful to grieve God, so does he find it agonizing to hurt or scandalize his fellow. "Abba Anthony said, 'Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ.'"³⁰ For Abba Poemen, the connection between persons is depicted as a ballast, a correlative relationship affected by one's repentance: "We and our brothers are two images (*δύο εἰκόνες*); when a man is watchful about himself, and blames himself, he finds his brother more honorable than himself; but when he appears to himself as good, then he finds his

²⁹ Cf. *Psalms* 118:32: *ὁδὸν ἐντολῶν σου ἔδραμον, ὅταν ἐπλάτυνας τὴν καρδίαν μου.*

³⁰ Ward, 3; PG 65.77.

brother evil compared to himself.”³¹ In another saying of Poemen, he equates this relationship with that of martyrdom. Quoting *John* (“Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for his friends”)³² he avers, “If someone hears an evil saying . . . one that harms [his brother] . . . he must fight in order not to say it, or if someone is taken advantage of and he bears it, without retaliating at all, then he is giving his life for his neighbor.”³³ In the mind of the Desert Fathers, salvation is wrapped up with one’s neighbor. The monk who stands before God with a humble heart is also the one who places all others above himself.

Two sayings of Abba Moses offer further insight into the nature of voluntary descent. An inquirer asked the abba, “What of the fasts and vigils which a man does, what do they accomplish?” He replied, “They enable the soul to be humbled (*ταπεινωθῆναι*). For it is written, ‘See my humiliation (*ταπείνωσιν*) and my travail (*κόπον*), and forgive all my sins’ (*Psalms* 24:18). If the soul produces these fruits, through them God may have compassion on the soul.”³⁴ For Moses, the objective of asceticism is to acquire humility — it is not undertaken for its own sake. And he reveals something else by quoting the psalm: humiliation is coupled with travail. It is through these “fruits” (in the plural)

³¹ Ward, 188 (revised); PG 65.357.

³² *John* 15:14.

³³ Ward, 184; PG 65.332.

³⁴ Ward, 142 (revised); PG 65.288.

that God has compassion on the soul, hence forgiving all of a person's sins. There is a sense here that humility is acquired through an active engagement with strife and an acceptance of shame. Self-condemnation is both an internal process of descent, and an external embrace of hardships facing the monk. The lives of the Desert Fathers provide a testimony to their voluntary sacrifice of comfort and their acceptance of travail and shame in order to find God.

In our second saying of Abba Moses, we discover the role of self-condemnation vis-à-vis prayer: "If the monk does not think in his heart that he is a sinner, God will not hear him."³⁵ The acceptance of shame, the recognition of one's sinful condition, and the resulting state of humble-mindedness establish a channel of communication between God and man. Perhaps this is because such a mode of existence resembles that of Jesus Christ. To quote *Matthew* again, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls."³⁶ The humble *kenosis* of Christ is embodied in the monastic life. The monk is able to converse with God precisely because he has borne his own cross to Golgotha.

The desired spiritual condition of the monk is presented as a state of continual repentance. "Abba Poemen said,

³⁵ Ward, 141; PG 65.288.

³⁶ *Matthew* 11:29.

‘If a man has attained to that which the Apostle speaks of “to the pure, everything is pure,” (*Titus* 1:15) he sees himself less than all creatures.’ The brother said, ‘How can I deem myself less than a murderer?’ The old man said, ‘When a man has really comprehended this saying, if he sees a man committing a murder he says, “He has only committed this one sin, but I commit sins every day.”’³⁷

The idea of placing oneself below even a murderer seems drastic, but in the spiritual life, such an admission constitutes a basic premise: “There is none righteous, no, not one.”³⁸ Poemen envisages the goal of humility as the ability to descend below every other person. Judging his own sin precludes the judgment of others. But something dramatic happens in the process — the monk who lives in such a state becomes pure himself. Self-condemnation acts as a powerful tool in the ascetic life. In another *apophthegma* Poemen says, “If a man blames himself, he is protected on all sides.”³⁹ Condemning oneself, rather than vindicating oneself, sets up a hedge of protection around the monk, almost like an amulet able to ward off temptation. We find the same theme in yet another of his sayings: “A brother said to Abba Poemen, ‘If I fall

³⁷ Ward, 180; *PG* 65.345.

³⁸ *Romans* 3:10.

³⁹ Ward, 180 (revised); *PG* 65.345.

into a shameful transgression, my thought (λογισμός) devours and accuses me (κατηγορεῖ) saying: "Why have you fallen?" The old man said to him, 'At the moment when a man goes astray, if he says "I have sinned," immediately it will have ceased."⁴⁰ Self-condemnation is a constant awareness of sin and internal repentance. The act of naming and confessing the sin has the power both to expunge it and to strengthen the monk so that he is less likely to fall prey to it again. The temptation immediately abates, and he is able to focus his attention once again on God.

Humility is equally effective in confounding the schemes of the demons. Abba Anthony was given a spiritual vision in order to teach him the efficacy of true humility: "I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and I said groaning, 'What can get through such snares?' Then I heard a voice saying to me, 'Humble-mindedness.'"⁴¹ Abba Macarius received a similar lesson. He saw the form of a demon approaching him with a knife to cut him; but the evil spirit was unable to inflict any harm. The demon groaned, "All that you have, we have also; you are distinguished from us only by humble-mindedness; by that you get the better of us."⁴² In both sayings, the state of humility is presented as the only effective means to defeat Satan. As we examined in

⁴⁰ Ward, 181 (revised); PG 65.345.

⁴¹ Ward, 2 (revised); PG 65.77.

⁴² Ward, 136 (revised); PG 65.277.

Chapter One, the devil is ever the great accuser. But against the monk who already blames himself for his own sin, Satan is impotent. In imitating the Publican, the monk frees himself from accusation and leaves himself to the mercy of the righteous Lord who vindicates his faithful servants.

CHAPTER THREE

Righteousness

HAVING LAID A FOUNDATION for our study by investigating two themes in the *Alphabetical Collection* — judgment and humility — it is now possible to examine the correlation with righteousness. As we concluded in Chapter One, there is a natural association in the *Sayings* between righteousness and judgment, especially in terms of the divine prerogative of judgment. In the psalms chanted or recited daily by many monks, κρίσις is frequently linked with δικαιοσύνη. Statements such as “God is a righteous judge,”¹ and “the heavens shall declare his righteousness, for God is himself judge,”² are ubiquitous in the Psalter. In the New Testament, we likewise find judgment and righteousness linked. For example, in *Acts* we read, “he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness.”³ On numerous oc-

¹ *Psalms* 7:11: Ὁ Θεὸς κριτὴς δίκαιος.

² *Psalms* 49:6: ἀναγγελοῦσιν οἱ οὐρανοὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ, ὅτι Θεὸς κριτὴς ἐστὶ.

³ 17:31: ἔστησεν ἡμέραν ἐν ἣ ἔμελλει κρίνειν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ.

casions, the monks refer to judgment and righteousness as interrelated concepts.

The connection between righteousness and humility, however, is less obvious. Once again, the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee provides a key to interpretation. According to Epiphanius of Cyprus, "God remits the debts of sinners who are penitent, for example, the sinful woman and the publican, but of the righteous man he even asks interest. This is what he says to the apostles, 'Except your righteousness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (*Matthew* 5:20)."⁴ The saying is paradoxical: one's righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven; and yet it is the penitent sinner who is pardoned of transgressions and granted salvation. As we unpack the concept of righteousness in the *apophthegmata*, the meaning of this saying will become clear.

RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD. Numerous scriptural passages describe God as righteous (*δίκαιος*).⁵ We may assume that the Desert Fathers, thoroughly immersed in the Bible, likewise understood God to be entirely righteous, never acting arbitrarily (although no saying in the *Alphabetical Collection*

⁴ Ward, 58–9; PG 65.165–8.

⁵ See, e.g., *Deuteronomy* 32:4; *Job* 4:17; *Psalms* 10:8; *Revelation* 16:7.

states this explicitly). Instead, righteousness is generally associated indirectly with God, referring to his heavenly kingdom and to the entire path towards salvation. As a young monk, Abba John the Eunuch questioned one of the elders, asking, "How have you been able to carry out the work of God in peace? For we cannot do it, even with labor." The elder replied, "We were able to do it, because we considered the work of God to be primary, and bodily needs to be subsidiary ... and that is why the Savior said to the disciples, 'Those of little faith, seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you' (*Matthew* 6:33)."⁶ Here the righteousness of God and his kingdom are integral in one soteriological reality. It is impossible to separate the goal from the process, or to detach salvation from its source, which is God.

This sheds light on a cryptic saying of Poemen: "A brother asked Abba Poemen saying, 'The heights (τὰ ὑψηλὰ), what is it?' The old man said to him, 'Righteousness (τὸ δικάϊωμα).'"⁷ We are not given the context for the question to Poemen, so it is difficult to ascertain what is meant by "the heights." The same

⁶ Ward, 105 (revised); PG 65.232–233.

⁷ Ward, 178 (revised), PG 65.341. τὸ δικάϊωμα may also be translated "the righteous thing/one" in the singular, and oftentimes as "righteous acts" or even "statutes" in the plural, i.e. that which a person follows in order to be in the right. All of these definitions are related and overlapping. See Lampe, s.v.

word (in the plural) is found in *Romans* 12:16: "Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate" (μὴ τὰ ὑψηλὰ φρονοῦντες ἀλλὰ τοῖς ταπεινοῖς συναπαγόμενοι).⁸ However, in this *apophthegma*, we are given no indication that "the heights" connotes an undesirable condition such as arrogance. Another alternative meaning is found in some patristic sources, such as Clement and Origen, who employ τὰ ὑψηλὰ to mean "the heights of contemplation."⁹ This would be a likely choice if the saying were attributed to someone like Evagrius; but the sayings of Abba Poemen are distinguished by their practical approach to the spiritual life, and there is no saying attributed to him that contains the Evagrian schema of the spiritual life.

Turning to another saying of Poemen, δικαιοσύνη is more clearly defined: "A brother questioned Abba Poemen saying, 'What does it mean to repent of a fault?' The old man said, 'Not to commit it again in the future. This is the reason the righteous ones (οἱ δίκαιοι) were called blameless, because they renounced sins and became righteous (δίκαιοι).'"¹⁰ Here Poemen identifies δικαιοσύνη with a way of life

⁸ A similar Pauline meaning is given in *1 Timothy* 6:17, where ὑψηλός and φρονέω are conjoined, yielding the word ὑψηλοφρονέω, meaning "to be haughty" or "to be proud." See BDAG, 1045, s.v. ὑψηλοφρονέω.

⁹ Lampe, 1467.

¹⁰ Ward, 184 (revised); PG 65.353.

focused upon purifying oneself from sin. A similar explanation is given elsewhere, where Poeman says, "The will of man (τὸ θέλημα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) is a brass wall between him and God, and a stone of stumbling. When a man renounces it, he also says to himself, 'In my God, I pass over the wall' (*Psalms* 18.29). Therefore, if righteousness (τὸ δικαίωμα) is united with the will, a man can labor successfully."¹¹ Presenting us with yet another antinomy, Poemen teaches that the desire to pursue righteousness is within the grasp of a man only when he renounces his own desires. Man must redefine his will, submitting it to the righteous will of God. As in the previous saying, δικαιοσύνη is depicted as a certain way of being and acting, but it is clear here that the righteousness of God precedes human righteousness, and persons must be "in" (ἐν) God in order to "pass over the wall."

Applying the aforesaid to how Abba Poemen understands "the heights," it is likely he denotes the path to, and the attainment of, the kingdom of heaven. As we saw in the second and third of Poemen's sayings, righteousness descends from God; but man must freely conform his will to it, forsaking sin and becoming truly righteous. The scriptural theme implicit

¹¹ Ward, 174 (revised). PG 65.333–6. See Lampe, 770 for other instances of κάμνω as meaning "to win by toil or labor," which best fits the context of this *apophthegma*. Cf. Epiphanius of Cyprus, *Against Heresies*, 80.4 (PG 489.10), where κάμνω is spoken of "unto righteousness" (εἰς δικαιοσύνην).

in all three of Poemen's sayings is the same as that of Abba John the Eunuch: "Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness."¹²

Although *δικαιοσύνη* is not directly attributed to God the Father in the *apophthegmata*, it is, nevertheless, attributed to Jesus Christ. Such is the case with the following saying of Amma Syncletica:

Here below we are not exempt from temptations. For the Scripture says, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). We sail on in darkness. The psalmist calls our life a sea and the sea is either full of rocks, or very rough, or else it is calm. We are like those who sail on a calm sea, and seculars are like those on a rough sea. We always set our course by the Sun of Righteousness (*Malachi* 4:2), but it can often happen that the secular is saved in tempest and darkness, for he keeps watch as he ought, while we go to the bottom through negligence, although we are on a calm sea, because we have let go of the guidance of Righteousness.¹³

¹² *Matthew* 6:33.

¹³ Ward, 235; Guy, 304 (revised). Guy does not capitalize "*le soleil de justice*," nor cites the biblical source; but the construction is unusual and must refer to the prophecy of Malachi, often applied to Christ in patristic sources.

Couched within an elaborate nautical metaphor, Syncletica compares the spiritual journey of monks to that of persons in the world. But for our present purposes, we must examine her usage of “righteousness.” In *Malachi* 4:2, the “Sun of Righteousness” (ἥλιος δικαιοσύνης) is personified, giving rise to messianic interpretations in early Christianity.¹⁴ Presumably, Syncletica refers to Jesus Christ when she speaks of the Sun of Righteousness. Christ is the standard by which the spiritual life must be compared — he is the source and exemplar of absolute righteousness. The monk who pursues Christ will reach the harbor of salvation, while the one who rejects his guidance will be shipwrecked. In the final sentence, Syncletica omits “Sun” and refers simply to “Righteousness.” Because of the parallel construction, both being references pertaining to guidance through the spiritual life, it is apparent that δικαιοσύνη in the second instance also signifies Christ. Thus, righteousness for Amma Syncletica is not an abstract concept, but a person.¹⁵

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is given the appellation “the Righteous One” (ὁ δίκαιος),¹⁶ as well

¹⁴ See ACC, 308–11, which collects pericopae from Valetinus, Origen, Ambrose of Milan, Ephrem the Syrian, Jerome, John Damascene, and John Chrysostom that interpret *Malachi* 4:2 as referring to Christ.

¹⁵ Interestingly, a very similar passage is found in John Chrysostom’s *Contra Anomoeos* 7.5–6.

¹⁶ *Acts* 7:52; 22:14; *1 John* 2:1.

as “the Righteousness of God” (θεοῦ δικαιοσύνη).¹⁷ Employing the same title for Christ, *1 Peter* 3:18 succinctly summarizes the early Christian *kerygma*: “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust (δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων), that he might bring us to God.” Such a biblical understanding is the theological backdrop for a saying of Epiphanius of Cyprus. Asked, “Is one righteous man (εἷς δίκαιος) enough to win over God?” the elder replied, “Yes, for he himself says: ‘Find one acting with discernment and righteousness, and I will have mercy on all the people’ (*Jeremiah* 5:1).”¹⁸ If we examine the quotation from *Jeremiah* within its original context, we discover that this verse is God’s challenge to the prophet. The prophet goes on to depict the incorrigible disobedience of the people of Jerusalem. He concludes that these are a people who “do not know the way of the Lord, even the judgment (κρίσιν) of God.”¹⁹ In quoting from this section of *Jeremiah*, Epiphanius is asserting that no person is so righteous as to “win over” God’s mercy for all. The allusion here is to the dogma that Christ, the only Righteous One, fulfilled the measure

¹⁷ *1 Corinthians* 1:30.

¹⁸ Ward, 58 (revised); PG 65.165. The verse from *Jeremiah* 5:1 quoted by Epiphanius differs considerably from the Brenton LXX. Epiphanius’ version runs as follows: Ἐρευνήσατε ἓνα ποιοῦντα κρίμα καὶ δικαιοσύνην, καὶ ἴλεως ἔσομαι παντὶ τῷ λαῷ. This version conveys the sense that God seeks someone who fulfills all the commandments in righteousness.

¹⁹ *Jeremiah* 5:4.

of the Hebraic Law, and through his death brought God's mercy to all peoples. As Epiphanius states in another saying, Christ is "truth itself" (*αὐτὴ ἡ ἀλήθεια*), and he "blesses and makes holy all those believing in him."²⁰ It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, in which man participates, that confers salvation.

JUSTIFICATION OF MAN. Frequently in the *apophthegmata* of the Desert Fathers, the spiritual life is presented in terms of the acquisition of *δικαιοσύνη*. As noted above, *δικαιοσύνη* is equated simultaneously with the kingdom of heaven (the goal) and the struggle to become holy (the process). It is here that we find an interplay with humility—a prerequisite virtue in the Christian life. The Gospel presents the following precept: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven."²¹ If *δικαιοσύνη* is taken as the entire process of salvation, then humility may be seen as an aspect of *δικαιοσύνη*. But more importantly, the Desert Fathers understand humility to be an important corrective to and safeguard against false righteousness. In a saying that Abba Daniel receives from Abba Arsenius, we become spectators of a vision granted to the latter:

²⁰ PG 65.164. Cf. Ward, 57.

²¹ *Matthew* 18:3–5.

[Arsenius] saw a temple and two men on horseback, opposite one another, carrying a piece of wood crosswise. They wanted to go in through the door, but could not because they held their piece of wood crosswise. Neither of them would draw back before the other, so as to carry the wood straight; so they remained outside the door. A voice said to the old man, "These men carry the yoke of righteousness with arrogance (*ὑπερηφάνιας*), and do not humble themselves so as to correct themselves and walk in the humble way of Christ. So they remain outside the kingdom of God."²²

In relating this story to Abba Daniel, Abba Arsenius is passing on a valuable lesson: righteousness and pride are antithetical. Arsenius contrasts external righteousness—the failing attributed to the Pharisees—with a true righteousness that is necessarily united to humility. In the gospel narratives, the sin of the Pharisees consists in their scrupulous concern for prescriptions of the law (*mitzvoth*) and their interpretation of the law as opposed to the cultivation of

²² Ward, 15–16 (revised); PG 65.100–1. It is interesting that *ὑπερηφάνια* is ascribed to Satan and is listed as one of the sins he uses to destroy souls in *Epistle of Barnabas* 20.1. This document is generally dated to 2nd c. Egypt, and was likely known by many of the Desert Fathers. *Barnabas* 20.2 goes on to describe sinners as "not knowing the reward of righteousness ... nor judging righteously (*κρίσει δικαίᾳ*)."

inner righteousness. Behind the *apophthegma* of Arsenius we hear an echo of the dominical saying, "Be careful of practicing your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven."²³

The connection between humility and righteousness is stated in a different way in the following enigmatic saying: "Abba Poemen said to Abba Isaac, 'Empty yourself (κούφισον) of a portion of your righteousness and you will have rest in a few days (καὶ ἔξεις ἀνάπαυσιν τὰς ὀλίγας ἡμέρας σου).'"²⁴ If, for the Desert Fathers, the acquisition of δικαιοσύνη comprises both the process and goal of the Christian life, then what utility exists in emptying oneself of righteousness? Perhaps Poemen is condemning external righteousness, just as Arsenius does in the previous saying. But this solution is unlikely. Abba Poemen asks Abba Isaac to let go of only a "portion" (μέρος) of his righteousness; Poemen does not display a com-

²³ *Matthew* 6:1 (revised). Original KJV has "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven." However, the Greek text reads: Προσέχετε [δὲ] τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν μὴ ποιεῖν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι αὐτοῖς· εἰ δὲ μὴ γε, μισθὸν οὐκ ἔχετε παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

²⁴ PG 65.357. ἀνάπαυσις in patristic usage may be associated specifically with asceticism, describing the higher state of prayer and virtue that a person reaches, especially in the monastic life. See Lampe, 115.

plete aversion to such righteousness, which would be expected if he were speaking about external scrupulosity. On two other occasions, Abba Poemen warns against the danger of “measuring” (μετρέω) one’s progress in the spiritual life: “To throw yourself before God, and to not measure your progress, and to cast aside your own will, are tools of the soul”;²⁵ and again, “Do not measure yourself, but rather live with one who himself is behaving well.”²⁶ Poemen identifies a danger in observing and recognizing virtue in oneself. In Poemen’s advice to Abba Isaac, he realizes that the latter is aware of his own righteousness (lest it would not make sense for Poemen to address it). So Poemen offers a caveat about Isaac measuring his own righteousness, and the inherent risk of becoming fixated upon the process instead of the goal.

When Abba Pambo once asked Anthony the Great, “What ought I to do?” the elder begins with, “Do not trust in you own righteousness...”²⁷ Anthony neatly encapsulates an important aspect of Pauline theology: “[A]ll have sinned, and come short of the glory of God ... Where is boasting then?”²⁸ As we explored in Chapter Two, humility begins with acknowledging one’s poverty before the righteous and sinless God. To trust in one’s own righteousness

²⁵ Ward, 172 (revised); PG 65.332.

²⁶ Ward, 177; PG 65.340.

²⁷ Ward, 2; PG 65.77.

²⁸ *Romans* 3:23, 27.

is to deny the source of righteousness. As Paul goes on to explain in *Romans*, man must trust in God's δικαιοσύνη, for he is "righteous and the one vindicating he who believes in Jesus."²⁹ In this biblical verse, two δικ- cognates are juxtaposed: δικαιοσύνη and δικαίω. The verbal form is translated in multiform ways, but the meanings overlap.³⁰ As we mentioned in our Introduction, the definition most appropriate for our present study is "to vindicate." In biblical literature, δικαίω is usually associated with κρίνω. In Chapter One we determined that, with the authority to judge comes the responsibility to either vindicate the accused (showing him to be in the right), or to condemn. The Desert Fathers, following the established tradition of the Church, believed this prerogative to be entrusted to Jesus Christ by the Father. Thus, it is the Righteous Lord who vindicates man, who determines if a person is righteous or not. Applying this to the saying of Abba Anthony we see that trusting in one's own righteousness is tantamount to

²⁹ Ibid., v. 26 (my own translation): δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ. Some scholars interpret statements such as these as referring to Jesus' faithfulness to his Father's covenant. However, this does not affect our thesis in any way. For such an interpretation, see Richard Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 190–201; and also *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), *passim*.

³⁰ See BDAG, 249; Lampe 370–1.

vindicating oneself, therefore usurping the sovereign authority of God. The fate of every person is suspended between these two poles of either vindication or condemnation. But though it is God's prerogative to judge his servant as righteous or not, there remains a certain tension or balance in which it seems, in certain *apophtegmata*, that God affirms the personal righteousness of the monk. For example, in a saying from Epiphanius, we read, "God sells righteousness at a very low price to those who wish to buy it: a little piece of bread, a cloak of no value, a cup of cold water, a mite."³¹ In this instance, righteousness becomes the property of the person who acts rightly. The *Sayings* do not resolve this tension between divine and human righteousness, but rather allows for the paradox to push our understanding beyond its limitations.

It is interesting to note that the Desert Fathers quote Paul in regards to justification only once in the *Alphabetical Collection*.³² Paul outlines his understanding of *δικαιοσύνη* primarily in *Romans*, with a similar (albeit simpler) argument in *Galatians*. The Desert Fathers were definitely familiar with the Pauline corpus, quoting from the epistles 178 times (only *Matthew* is quoted nearly as often).³³ With numerous

³¹ Ward, 59; PG 65.168.

³² See Chapter One, n. 43 and accompanying text.

³³ According to Mortari's count, cited in Burton-Christie, 302. This includes *Hebrews*, which was assumed to be of Pauline authorship by the majority of Christians in the 4th/5th c.

references to *δικαιοσύνη* and the vindication of man in the *apophthegmata*, why do the Desert Fathers refer to Paul only once? Perhaps this is because the complex case Paul makes concerning *δικαιοσύνη* is directed toward certain recipients — primarily Jews, proselytes, God-fearers and Judaizers in the first century churches at Rome and Galatia. It may be said that Paul's nuanced understanding of *δικαιοσύνη* is not necessarily applicable to Christian monks living in the fourth century. As Burton-Christie points out regarding the exegetical approach of the Desert Fathers, "The silence and solitude of the desert ... focused the attention ... upon moral, ascetical, and psychological questions in a particular and acute way. The practical orientation of the Desert Fathers means that interpretation of Scripture in the *Sayings* almost never occurs for its own sake but is imbedded in the life and concerns of the desert."³⁴ For the Desert Fathers, the systematic exposition of Paul was interpreted through the lens of daily monastic life. Even so, the basic premise behind Paul's theory of justification is evident in the *apophthegmata*: it is God who vindicates man and declares him righteous, because all *δικαιοσύνη* flows from God. But whereas the emphasis in Paul is on God's work (thus he oftentimes uses *δικαιόω* more in the sense of "acquitting the guilty"),³⁵ the Desert Fathers emphasize the

³⁴ Ibid., 61.

³⁵ See esp. *Romans* 3:24, 5.6–11; *1 Corinthians* 4:4. Also, see

synergy of human effort in the process of becoming righteous. However, both Paul and the Desert Fathers agree that *δικαιοσύνη* is not merely a status or fictitious legal standing. Beginning in *Romans* 6, Paul begins to mention "obedience unto righteousness" (*ὑπακοῆς εἰς δικαιοσύνην*),³⁶ explicating the human role in becoming righteous. Christians, in cooperation with the Spirit, are called to "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God," and to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind."³⁷ For Paul, just as for the Desert Fathers, "the kingdom of God is . . . righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."³⁸

To rightly understand the Desert Fathers' perception of *δικαιοσύνη*, we must follow their cue, beginning with the gospels rather than with Paul. With the Publican and the Pharisee providing the key to unlocking their approach, we turn again to the saying of Epiphanius presented at the beginning of this chapter: "God remits the debts of sinners who are penitent, for example, the sinful woman and the publican, but of the righteous man he even asks interest. This is what he says to the apostles, 'Except your righteous-

BDAG, 249.

³⁶ *Romans* 6:16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12:1-2: *παραστήσαι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν θυσίαν ζώσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ; μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοός.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14:17.

ness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (*Matthew* 5:20)."³⁹ In the gospel parable, the Publican is vindicated by God because he condemned his own actions, and the Pharisee is condemned by God because he vindicated himself and judged his fellowman. In another saying we find the same principle applied to an Old Testament character: "Abba Poemen said this about the son of Shemai, 'His mistake was to justify himself; whoever does that destroys himself.'"⁴⁰ Implicit in both sayings is the requisite virtue of humility, the *sine qua non* of justification. At the opposite pole is the self-righteousness of the Pharisee. Avoiding the pharisaical form of righteousness, as the *apophthegma* commends, is accomplished through the penitential life.

Another saying that elaborates on justification belongs to Abba Anoub, but is contained within the sayings of Poemen.⁴¹ Anoub offers an explication of the verse, "All things are pure to the pure" (*Titus* 1.15): "If a man really affirms this saying, and he sees the shortcomings of his brother, he makes his righteousness to swallow up the shortcomings (ποιεῖ

³⁹ Ward, 58–9; *PG* 65.165–8.

⁴⁰ Ward, 195.

⁴¹ In the Sayings, the apophthegma immediately before the present one is Poemen's explanation of *Titus* 1.15. See Chapter Two, n. 39 and accompanying text for his interpretation. Abba Anoub's interpretation, cited here, is in response to the same interlocutor who previously inquired of Poemen.

τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ καταπιεῖν αὐτά). The brother says to him, ‘Of what kind is his righteousness?’ The old man answered, ‘That he constantly blames himself (*ἵνα πάντοτε καταμέμφηται ἑαυτόν*)’⁴² There are two complimentary components to this saying. First, there is Abba Anoub’s advice to the brother: purity is to see only the righteousness in others. In effect, humbling oneself is an active motion of placing oneself below others. Second, there is the praiseworthy trait of the other monk: his righteousness radiates from his self-condemnatory attitude. Like the Publican, the monk is vindicated — deemed to be righteous — precisely because he does not consider himself so. The words of Abba Anoub reveal to us a glimpse of justification in action.

⁴² Ward, 181 (revised); PG 65.345.

Conclusion

AT THE BEGINNING OF OUR STUDY we posited a hermeneutical key by which to interpret the *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*. Although *Luke* is quoted or alluded to by the Desert Fathers roughly half as much as *Matthew* in the *Sayings*, the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (*Luke* 18) is exceptional in that it is directly referenced four times throughout the text. Our first encounter with the parable in the present study was an *apophthegm* from Abba Ammonas: “[K]eep the word of the Publican always in your heart, and you shall be able to be saved (δύνασαι σωθῆναι).”¹ It would seem that the abba’s saying is a response to *Mark* 10:26: “Who then can be saved? (τίς δύναται σωθῆναι;)” Ammonas answers the apostles’ query with the parable. By implication, the monastic life modeled on the parable of the Publican and the Phariess is the surest path to the salvation.

During the course of this study, we have explored various underlying themes from the *Sayings* in order to

¹ Ward, 26 (revised); PG 65.120.

forge a better understanding of the Desert Fathers' approach to *δικαιοσύνη*, and what the text as a whole conveyed to later generations of readers about this subject. To get to the heart of the Desert Fathers' views concerning righteousness, it was necessary first to establish the importance of judgment and humility in their thought. The parable of the Publican and the Pharisee ties together concepts both related and disparate, providing us with a cohesive answer to our initial query.

In Chapter One we examined the meaning of judgment in the *Sayings*. The Desert Fathers lived with a constant awareness of the final judgment. Fear of God and remembrance of the Day of the Lord are synonymous. Theirs was an "inaugurated eschatology" in which judgment is always at the door. Such a view inspired the monks to maintain constant vigilance. In addition, in recognizing the Lord's sovereign prerogative of judgment, the monks understood that judgment of their fellowman is completely excluded. They entrusted all judgment to God, and instead judged only themselves and their own sin.

In Chapter Two, we saw how personal judgment was realized in the practice of self-condemnation. The goal of the monastic life is depicted as a quest for acquiring the gospel virtue of humility. By comparing themselves to God, and not their fellowman, the monks were able to cultivate a state of continual repentance and humble-mindedness. The voluntary practice of descending, of placing all others above

oneself, opened the monk to converse with God and attracted his grace. In their ascetical life, the Desert Fathers imitated Christ and voluntarily accepted shame and strife as necessary to the acquisition of humility. As the monks drew closer to God, they sensed their sinfulness ever more deeply, like the prophet Isaiah in his theophanic vision.² Thus, the Desert Fathers present us with a dynamic formula: the more the monk appropriates righteousness, the less righteous he considers himself.

Finally, in Chapter Three, we examined righteousness more closely, determining its meaning in the *Sayings*. For the Desert Fathers, righteousness is simultaneously a divine attribute, the kingdom of heaven, and the process of becoming righteous. These usages are not mutually exclusive. The process of becoming righteous is contained in the continual act of self-condemnation that leads to the spiritual condition of humility. But the Desert Fathers also connect righteousness/justification with the final judgment, when Jesus Christ will be seated upon the “dread judgment seat.” The two poles of judgment — vindication or condemnation — reflect the choice that a monk is faced with. The monk who, like the Publican, has spent his life condemning himself and not his fellowman, will be vindicated by Christ; whereas the one who vindicates himself, like the Pharisee, will

² Cf. *Isaiah* 64:6.

hear the condemnation pronounced. This comprises the spiritual principle hinted at throughout the *Alphabetical Collection*: be judged now and not later.³

The Desert Fathers based their understanding of righteousness/justification on a generous and holistic reading of the Scriptures, interpreted through the lens of the ascetic life. But the ascetic life of the monks was not in opposition to the secular Christian life; rather, the monks attempted to live out the gospel precepts to their fullest extent, much in the same way as did the earliest Christians (as described in *Acts*). In their gatherings, the Desert Fathers heard the Bible read frequently, and for those monks who were literate and had access to their own copies of the Scriptures, they were able to ruminate upon passages daily. The monks then applied the words of Scripture pragmatically to the spiritual life. They did not formulate a systematic approach to justification divorced from the context of the pursuit of holiness; nor did they ignore juridical biblical images. Instead, they interpreted *δικαιοσύνη* in terms of the daily spiritual walk—a life lived in humility, voluntary descent and the striving for communion with God. As Anthony the Great avers, the outcome of the fruitful monastic life is the attainment of perfect love—a love that casts out all fear.⁴

³ Cf. *Matthew* 7:1–2; *Luke* 6:37; *Romans* 2:1–3; *1 Corinthians* 11:31; *James* 5:9.

⁴ Cf. *1 John* 4:18. See *supra*, n. 98, 99 and accompanying text.

Appendix

In order to demonstrate the continuity in the interpretation of *δικαιοσύνη* in the Greek Fathers, particularly in relationship to monasticism and the ascetical writings produced by monasticism, we shall now look at how the *Sayings* of the Desert Fathers were received, both in Late Antiquity and today.

RCEPTION OF THE DESERT FATHERS — PAST AND PRESENT. After the time of its final compilation and redaction, the *Sayings* were received by future generations as one integral text. It especially became a favorite reading for monks throughout the Christian world, serving as a blueprint for both eremitic and coenobitic monasticism. Although there is no evidence that any expositor outlined the same themes in the *Sayings* that we have herein examined, a cursory look at other texts reveals that later readers came to the same conclusions. As mentioned above, the compilation and redaction of the *Sayings* is generally ascribed to fifth century Palestine, a product of the burgeoning monastic movement in that region.

This is borne out by the three earliest collections of writings to be strongly influenced by the *Sayings*, all attributed to the sixth and seventh century Levant: *The Letters of Barsanuphius and John*; *Discourses and Sayings* by Dorotheos of Gaza; and John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. All three texts show evidence of inspiration from the *Sayings*, and thus provide a starting point for examining the influence of the Desert Fathers on later readers.

Barsanuphius was a monk from Egypt who came to settle in the Thavatha region of Palestine.¹ A monastic community sprung up around him, and he was later joined by Abba John. The two elders lived as anchorites in adjacent huts, both providing spiritual counsel to the monastic community that looked to them for guidance. Their advice was strongly influenced by the Desert Fathers, perhaps owing to Barsanuphius' origins in Egypt. Chrysavgis finds at least eighty direct references from the *Sayings* in their *Letters*, and fifty instances in which the Desert Fathers themselves or their writings are referred to as an important foundation for the monastic life.²

Many of the same themes found in the *Sayings*—judgment (especially self-condemnation), humility, and the acquisition of righteousness—appear in the responses of Barsanuphius and John to various

¹ *Letters from the Desert*, trans. and intro. John Chrysavgis (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2003), 10–1.

² *Ibid.*, 50.

queries from monks, clergy and laypersons. To illustrate the similarity to the Desert Father's views on justification, we shall cite two examples. The first is an answer to a question posed by the deacon in their monastic community. Barsanuphius explains that,

in continually condemning yourself, your heart feels compunction in order to receive repentance. For, he who by the prophet said: "Be first to confess your sins, so that you may be justified" (*Isaiah* 43:26), this same one justifies you and renders you innocent of every condemnation. Indeed, it says, "It is God who justifies; who is it then that will condemn you?" (*Romans* 8:33) So, as I have on other occasions stated to you, acquire humility, obedience, and submission, and you shall be saved.³

This remarkable passage brings together all three themes examined in our study. In our second example, we see the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee employed to demonstrate the spiritual principle of justification by self-condemnation. John responds to a brother who asks whether he should condemn another monk for sinning: "[W]e do not know whether through his repentance, the sinful brother will be more pleasing to God, like the Publican who in an

³ Ibid., 109.

instant was saved through humility and confession. For it was the Pharisee who left condemned by his own arrogance.”⁴ John concludes, “[L]et us imitate the humility of the Publican and condemn ourselves in order to be justified; and let us avoid the arrogance of the Pharisee in order not to be condemned.”

Abba Dorotheos was a disciple of Barsanuphius and John. In his *Discourses and Sayings*, he frequently quotes from the *Alphabetical Collection*, and arranges his chapters according to themes emphasized by the Desert Fathers. In the chapter “On Fear of God,” Dorotheos advises, “One forms a desire of God through fear of condemnation; this is ... the starting point.”⁵ In the chapter “On Humility,” Dorotheos elaborates on the necessity of this virtue, and the means to acquiring it. At one point he states, “If a painful experience comes to a humble man, straightway he goes against himself, straightway he accuses himself as the one worthy of punishment, and he does not set about accusing anyone or putting the blame on anyone else.”⁶ Here Dorotheos ties humility with self-condemnation and refraining from judging others.

In the chapter “On Refusal to Judge our Neighbor,” Dorotheos brings in the parable of Publican and the Pharisee as evidence that judging others leads to

⁴Cf. 1 John 4:18. See Chapter One, n. 67, 68 and accompanying text.

⁵Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*. trans. and intro. Eric Wheeler (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1977), 109.

⁶*Ibid.*, 96.

condemnation. After citing the parable, he concludes, "It was then that he made a judgment. He condemned a person and the dispositions of his soul—to put it shortly, his whole life. Therefore, the tax-collector rather the Pharisee went away justified."⁷ He goes on to lament, "Why do we not rather judge ourselves and our own wickedness which we know so accurately and about which we have to render an account to God? Why do we usurp God's right to judge?"⁸ Dorotheos includes an entire chapter titled "On Self-Accusation," in which he quotes from the *Sayings* nine times.⁹ And finally, in the chapter "On Consultation," he warns of the danger of self-righteousness, quoting the saying of Abba Poemen, examined above ("The will of man is a brass wall standing between him and God").¹⁰ Therein he equates the path to righteousness with relinquishing self-will and depending instead on the will of God.

John Climacus was a near contemporary of Barsanuphius, John and Dorotheos. He worked out his salvation in the renowned monastery located on Mount Sinai. His "surname" is derived from the title of his manual on the Christian spiritual life, *The Ladder* (κλίμαξ) of *Divine Ascent*, a text that likewise cites the Desert Fathers on numerous occasions. Cor-

⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁸ Ibid., 132–3.

⁹ Ibid., 140–8.

¹⁰ See Chapter Three, n. 11 and accompanying text.

respondences with the latter are ubiquitous. Regarding judgment, John Climacus writes, "During prayer and supplication, stand with trembling like a convict standing before a judge, so that... you may extinguish the wrath of the just Judge."¹¹ He frequently advises self-condemnation as the means to acquiring "holy humility";¹² and he warns, "Do not be self-confident until you hear the final judgment passed upon yourself."¹³ Regarding the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, John Climacus cites it twice. In the first instance, the Pharisee typifies the passion of pride and denial of God.¹⁴ And in the second instance, the Publican exemplifies humility: "He who asks God for less than his dessert will certainly receive more than he deserves. This is demonstrated by the Publican who asked for forgiveness, but received justification."¹⁵ The emphasis is once again on the justification of one who humbles himself.

From the eighth century onwards, the corpus of ascetical writings in the Eastern Church continued to multiply. In addition to the writings of Barsanuphius and John, Dorotheos and John Climacus, the *Sayings* were joined by writings from Isaac the Syrian, Abba

¹¹ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Rev. ed. (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 71.

¹² See, e.g., *Ibid.*, 142.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

Zosimos, John Moschos, Maximos the Confessor and many more, as well as entire collections of sayings by one particular father recorded in the *Sayings*, such as Ephrem the Syrian, Evagrius, Anthony the Great and John Cassian. The traditions and teachings of the Desert Fathers became part of the common parlance of eastern monasticism, and the principle of justification by self-condemnation became a recurrent theme. Although it is beyond the scope of the present study, many more examples of patristic dissemination of this concept may be given. The same remains true today. In order to demonstrate the continuity of this teaching in eastern monasticism, we will look at two contemporary monastic elders — Elder Sophrony (Sakharov) and Elder Paisios (Eznepidis).

Elder Sophrony, a Russian by birth, made his way to the monastic republic of Mount Athos in Greece in 1925. He became a disciple of Silouan the Athonite, learning the ancient traditions of Orthodox monasticism. He later migrated to Great Britain, founding a monastery in Essex in 1959. Before his repose in 1993, Father Sophrony wrote several books on the spiritual life, of which five are available in English translation: *The Undistorted Image*, *The Monk of Mount Athos*, *Wisdom from Mount Athos*,¹⁶ *His Life is Mine*¹⁷ and

¹⁶ These first three works have since been compiled into one volume: *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991).

¹⁷ (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1977).

We Shall See Him as He Is.¹⁸ Two additional works, published post-mortem, record his articles and sayings: *On Prayer*¹⁹ and *Words of Life*.²⁰ In addition, his teachings are also recorded in the writings of his disciple, Father Zacharias (Zacharou).²¹

An underlying theme in Elder Sophrony's thought is the "inverted pyramid."²² The observable hierarchy of the world, with all its inequality and lack of justice, represents a pyramid. But with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, the pyramid has been turned upside-down. Christ himself is the summit of the inverted pyramid because of his extreme humility and willingness to take on "the burdens and infirmities of others." In imitation of Christ, the "Christian goes downwards, into the depths of the over-turned pyramid." Like the Desert Fathers, Sophrony stresses the role of voluntary descent, an action contrary to human logic. Quoting the conclusion to the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee,²³ he writes: "[T]he more a man abases himself in self-condemnation, the higher will God exalt him."²⁴ Though he does

¹⁸ (Platina: St. Herman of Alaska Press, 2006).

¹⁹ (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1996).

²⁰ (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1998).

²¹ See *Christ, Our Way and Our Life: A Presentation of the Theology of Archimandrite Sophrony* (South Canaan: St. Tikhon Seminary Press, 2003).

²² *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 237–40.

²³ *Luke* 18:14.

²⁴ *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 78.

not refer to the parable elsewhere, Elder Sophrony is undoubtedly aware of the connection between the inverted pyramid and justification. He asks rhetorically, "Why does our self-condemnation justify us before God?"²⁵ He goes on to explain that following Christ entails true repentance that results in Christ-like humility. This way of life not only justifies the doer, but even justifies his ancestors.²⁶ Elaborating on this, Sophrony states, "This lowering, this humbling of ourselves is essential if we would preserve a genuinely Christian disposition... And the deeper one goes in self-condemnation, the higher God raises one."²⁷ The person who voluntarily descends likewise acknowledges God's sovereign right to judge his creatures: "It is better not to judge. To live in the fear of God means to be afraid to judge someone else in a sinful way, and not as God would judge him."²⁸ All of this culminates in righteousness. In an exegesis of *1 John* 1:8–9,²⁹ Sophrony explains, "When we repent, resolutely condemning ourselves before God and man, we are cleansed within."³⁰ Like the Desert

²⁵ *His Life is Mine*, 60

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68–9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁸ *Words of Life*, 50.

²⁹ "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just (δικαιος) to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (ἀδικίας)."

³⁰ *Words of Life*, 71.

Fathers, Elder Sophrony connects self-condemnation with the process of being made righteous by God.

Elder Paisios the Athonite was a contemporary of Elder Sophrony. After the Greek civil war ended in 1949, he moved to Mount Athos to become a monk. In contrast to the well-educated Sophrony, Paisios possessed only an elementary school education. However, his love for the ascetic fathers and his perspicacity in understanding them led him to many of the same conclusions as Sophrony. Paisios' occasional writings, letters and spiritual counsels to his disciples have been recorded in several volumes in Greek, and are gradually being translated into English. Among those already translated are *Epistles*,³¹ *With Pain and Love for Contemporary Man*,³² and *Spiritual Awakening*.³³ Elder Paisios reposed in 1994 in Thessalonica.

Throughout his writings, Elder Paisios mentions what he refers to as "the spiritual laws." Though he does not provide a working definition for these laws, we may infer by context what is meant. For example, an inquirer asked him if a person who accepts praise, hence becoming conceited, will suffer a downfall on account of the evil eye. He replied, "No, that's not the

³¹ (Thessaloniki: Holy Monastery of the Evangelist John the Theologian, 2002).

³² (Thessaloniki: Holy Monastery of the Evangelist John the Theologian, 2007).

³³ (Thessaloniki: Holy Monastery of the Evangelist John the Theologian, 2007).

evil eye. In this case, the spiritual laws are at work. God removes his grace from man and some harm happens.”³⁴ In another work, Paisios recounts a story about a group of Christians who insisted on distributing to the poor in public rather than discretely, specifically with the aim of being congratulated. As a result of their prideful intention, God allowed for the charity to be seized by a group of hooligans.³⁵ From these and other instances, it would seem that Paisios equates the spiritual laws with the principle of voluntary descent. We find confirmation of this in his *Epistles*. Regarding pride, he writes, “He who justifies himself when he makes a mistake transforms his heart into a demonic refuge.”³⁶ He adds, “Those... who struggled spiritually... judging their own selves, are released from the trial of the righteous Judge on the Day of Judgment... When we seek to be justified in this life and avoid being rebuked, we reveal that the worldly way of thinking is still robust within us.”³⁷ In another letter, Paisios equates humility with justification before God: “[When] humility becomes a permanent state of being... even spiritual laws will cease to operate.”³⁸ The state of humble-mindedness places a person on the other side of judgment, and

³⁴ *With Pain and Love*, 114.

³⁵ *Spiritual Awakening*, 188.

³⁶ *Epistles*, 138.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

condemnation no longer applies. Elder Paisios does not quote the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee in any of these three works, but it is obvious that he understands the very same principle: justification through self-condemnation.

EPILOGUE. The ascetical tradition of the Christian East may be seen as an unbroken tradition, passed on from generation to generation via the spoken and written word. As we have examined the writings of the Desert Fathers, and in particular the *Sayings*, we have come face to face with this living tradition. While it is possible to analyze this tradition through the lens of academia, we must also bear in mind that the Desert Fathers—as with all ascetics—never intended their work to be commended to scholastic inquiry. Rather, these monks pursued one single aim: communion with God. Their theology was rooted in asceticism, and their classroom was the desert. Separated from the world, they embodied the Scriptures in their lives, enacting the Gospel each and every day. And this way of life continues in monasteries throughout the world. To truly enter into the mind of the Desert Fathers, and to perceive their vision of the cosmos and salvation, one must likewise embody the prayer of the Publican.

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The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* has inspired Christians for generations. In *Prayer of the Publican*, Joseph Lucas takes a fresh look at this classic text to see what these ancient sages tell us about *dikaiosyne* — the righteousness of man and God's justification. From the workshop of the desert comes an approach to justification with implications for both personal spiritual renewal and ecumenical dialogue.

"What do the Fathers of the Christian East say about the meaning of justification and righteousness? Whereas "justification" became an important doctrine in the Roman Catholic Church and in the various Protestant denominations, the Eastern Orthodox Church did not develop such a teaching. And yet the language of *dikaiosyne* is common to both the Septuagint and the New Testament, read and interpreted by all the Greek Fathers. In *Prayer of the Publican*, Joseph Lucas explores the usage and understanding of *dikaiosyne* in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. In the Semitic mindset, the search for truth is manifested in "doing the truth" (the Greek *πράττειν* is more important than "to be"). These monastic fathers and mothers interpreted Scripture through the lens of the ascetic life, developing a view of "justification" exemplified in the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee: to be justified by God, you must actively condemn yourself. The mortification of self-love and egocentricity — those sources of biological death — leads to the rebirth through baptism and repentance unto life in the kingdom."

— Rt. Rev. Dr. Maxim (Vasiljevic), Bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Western American Diocese

"Joseph Lucas has provided a very welcome and illuminating study of *dikaiosyne* in the writings of the Desert Fathers. His study offers a very fine treatment of the varied meanings of *dikaiosyne* in these writings, as well as the role of *dikaiosyne* in the spiritual lives of the Desert Fathers. His appendix on the reception of the Desert Fathers is an added bonus."

— Rev. Dr. John D. Jones, Department of Philosophy, Marquette University

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